



***“We want our child
to HAVE a future.
Let’s start there.”***

WHITE PAPER

FUTURE READY SCHOOLS

2026

**An Education Worth Having: What parents
think about school, the future of work, and
the age of AI**



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About this publication

The Future Ready Schools Report 2026 presents findings from the Future Ready Schools Survey, together with analysis of emerging educational trends and contemporary research on the future of learning. It is intended to contribute to informed discussion among school leaders, educators, policymakers and families about preparing young people for a rapidly changing world.

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A full disclosure regarding the commissioning, funding, methodology and analysis of the Future Ready Schools Survey is provided within this report.

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iNTRoDUCtiON

This White Paper comes at a time of profound global uncertainty. The arrival of generative artificial intelligence at the end of 2022 marked a turning point: freely available AI capable of performing complex cognitive tasks had moved from the research lab into the pockets of anyone with a smartphone. Since then, the technology has evolved at a pace that has surprised even those building it, and investment in its continued development has skyrocketed. Many commentators now believe we are not far from Artificial General Intelligence, AGI, the threshold at which AI systems match or exceed human cognitive performance across virtually all domains. What that will mean for humanity remains genuinely unknown. What is already clear is that the pace of change is outpacing our capacity to keep up, to adapt, and to ensure the viability of employment.

Since the public release of Large Language Models such as ChatGPT in late 2022, generative AI has raised urgent and unresolved questions for schools: about teaching and learning, about assessment and academic integrity. But a different and equally important question has received far less attention: what is in the minds of parents, the people who entrust their children to schools? What do parents see as essential for their children’s education if the next generation is to have access to the same opportunities they have had? And do they believe schools are meeting those expectations?

This paper is written in two parts.

Part 1, The Case for Change, examines the challenges our society faces with the emergence of generative AI and the spectre of artificial general intelligence, with particular attention to the impact on the economy and the future of work. It then turns to the implications for what schools teach and, crucially, what they do not. It traces the history of how our current system was built, examines the dead hand of a standardising policy agenda that has tightened its grip over three decades, and argues that the system we have was designed for a world that no longer exists. It makes the case that changing a centuries-old system cannot be answered with a quick policy fix. It will require an extended, ongoing community conversation involving educators, parents, the broader public and policymakers, something closer to a citizens’ assembly than a ministerial directive. But watching how quickly AI is developing and reshaping the landscape, this conversation cannot wait. It must start now. And parents are ready for it, as the data in Part 2 shows.

Part 2, Demand for Change—what parents are wanting from education, presents the findings of the Future Ready Schools Survey, a national study of Australian parents conducted by ViVEDUS in 2026. It draws on the perspectives of 1,105 parents of school-aged children to address one of the most important questions facing education today:

38%

of parents believe schools are preparing their children for the future workforce.

75%

of parents say academic development should no longer be the sole priority.

11%

of parents said that they were satisfied with what their child’s school currently offers.

“What is an education worth having in the age of AI?”

The findings challenge assumptions, surface uncomfortable truths, and point toward a future in which schools must fundamentally shift what they teach and assess if young people are to be genuinely prepared for the world in which we now find ourselves. Only 38 per cent of parents believe schools are preparing their children for the future workforce. Seventy-five per cent of parents say academic development should no longer be the sole priority. They want their children to be taught to be curious, to think creatively, to be resilient and to solve complex problems ahead of (50.83%), or equal to (24.50%) academic development. Alarming, only 11.37% of parents said that they were satisfied with what their child’s school currently offers.

The findings provide compelling evidence for education authorities, departments and school leaders alike. While governments and systems can use this data to inform

policy and reform, school leaders are uniquely positioned to respond strategically to these pressing concerns, strengthening their school’s capacity to attract and retain enrolments while, most importantly, ensuring every student has the best possible opportunity to capitalise on their strengths through an unprecedented period of massive disruption.

The paper closes with ten recommendations directed at policymakers and school leaders. The question parents are asking is urgent and uncomfortable: what are we doing, right now, to prepare their children? This White Paper hopes to make that question impossible to ignore.



Dr Paul Browning OAM
Founder, ViVEDUS
Author, *Principled: 10 leadership practices that build trust*

PART 1: THE CASE FOR CHANGE

A PERSONAL BEGINNING

I finished school in 1985. I attended several government primary schools before completing my secondary education at a Catholic high school. My HSC score was 392. I was chasing the then-magical 400 mark (the perfect score was 500) that unofficial threshold that signalled you were really smart. I missed it. Life went on.

I valued my schooling. It gave me a solid foundation. But looking back with forty years of perspective, and with education as my career, I find myself asking a question I didn't think to ask at the time: did it truly prepare me for my future?

Much has changed in the classroom since 1985, but remarkably, much has also stayed the same. Technology, certainly, has transformed beyond recognition. In 1985, our school had just a handful of Apple IIe computers. I was lucky enough to get access at lunchtime, and with a friend, I wrote basic code that made our names scroll across a green screen. We thought we were cutting edge. In a small way, we were. However, the deeper story, the story of what education is for, and who it serves, runs much further back than my own schooling.

IS EDUCATION KEEPING PACE?

Every generation has been educated for the world it was entering. The question is whether our schools are doing the same today.

I was the first person in my family, including an extensive extended family, to earn a PhD. My father, the eldest of eight, was the first to receive a university degree, in medicine. His father, a farmer, likely received only a basic schooling. And if I go back further still, to my great, great, great, great, grandfather, a man who was five years old at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, he received no formal education at all. His father taught him what he needed to know. Robert Browning (not the poet) was a dairy farmer. He was illiterate. And the education he received was precisely calibrated to his world: how to read the seasons, how to know when the herd was ailing, and how to count well enough to ensure he was getting a fair price for his produce. That was sufficient. That was an education worth having, for him, in his time.

BORN IN THE FACTORY. BUILT FOR THE OFFICE.

Our modern education system was not designed for the age of AI or the complexities of a world facing enormous challenges. It was designed for the Industrial Revolution, and it has been faithfully serving that original purpose ever since. However, we should be careful about calling that period a revolution. The transformation from agrarian to industrial society took the better part of eighty years. It was less an explosion than a slow tide, rising across generations. But as factories spread through the cities of Europe, North America and eventually Australia, a new kind of workforce was needed, and a new kind of education emerged to supply it.

Factories needed accountants to manage their books, secretaries to handle correspondence, clerks, supervisors, engineers and administrators. The emerging middle class needed to be literate and numerate. They needed to be punctual, compliant, and capable of performing defined tasks within hierarchical systems. And so, the modern school was born, not as a place of discovery, but as a homogenised and standardised preparation ground for economic participation. Its purpose was clear: equip the masses with the skills to be employable and, in doing so, offer them a path to financial security and social standing. Education was the engine of social mobility. And for much of the twentieth century, it worked.

"The school that educated my great-grandparents is, in its fundamental architecture, still educating our children today. The curriculum has evolved. The technology in classrooms has changed. The language we use has shifted. But the underlying structure, age-based cohorts, subject-based timetables, a focus on the retention and recall of knowledge, remains largely intact. It is a system designed to produce reliable workers for a world of defined roles and predictable futures."

Paul Browning

This is not a casual observation. It is the central argument of Professor Alan Reid’s landmark work, *Changing Australian education: How policy is taking us backwards and what can be done about it* (2019). Reid, Professor Emeritus of Education at Adelaide University and one of Australia’s most distinguished educational thinkers, argues that for three decades, Australian education has been dominated by what he calls a “standardising discourse”, rooted in neoliberal ideology, that has steadily reduced education to a set of performance indicators designed to demonstrate the ‘productivity’ of the school sector. The outcome, Reid contends, is a system that has made the work of schools progressively more difficult, failed to address the challenges of the future, and treated education as a private commodity rather than a public good.

Reid’s diagnosis is stark. Teachers, he argues, spend so much time preparing students for high-stakes tests, gathering data and filling in forms that many feel the

life has been squeezed out of their role. Schooling has been turned into a market, and school leaders are forced to spend precious time and resources competing with other schools rather than collaborating with them. The professional experience of educators is disregarded as policymakers turn to the corporate world and self-appointed commentators to determine curriculum and funding directions. The result: a schooling system that is becoming more segregated, in which children from poorer backgrounds fall further behind, public schools are starved of funds, and good teachers leave (Reid, 2019).

Reid calls instead for a new educational narrative, one that is futures-focused, that prizes flexibility, adaptability, collaboration and agility, and that is built around student-centred teaching, inquiry, formative assessment and teacher autonomy. His vision, written before the arrival of generative AI, reads today as a prescient roadmap for precisely the transformation this White Paper argues is now urgent.

“In 2026 we need a curriculum that is built for the 21st century and not one that more closely resembles the requirements of Prussian soldiers or factory workers.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

AI AND THE FUTURE OF WORK, AND DEMOCRACY

The concern about AI’s impact on employment has moved into the mainstream of Australian economic and public life, and it is arriving faster than most institutions, including our schools, are prepared for.

Previous waves of technological disruption, mechanisation, computerisation, and the internet unfolded over decades, giving workers, industries, and education systems time to adapt. Advancing AI technologies are not affording us that luxury. The capabilities being developed and deployed today are not merely automating routine tasks. They are beginning to encroach on the kinds of cognitive work, analysis, judgement, synthesis, and communication that we have long assumed were the exclusive province of educated human beings.

The disruption of AI is now being named explicitly by Australia’s most prominent economic commentators. Writing for ABC News in January 2026, veteran finance journalist Alan Kohler declared that while he had entered 2025 believing climate change was humanity’s most urgent challenge, he had revised that view: by 2026, AI had become “more pressing” (Kohler, 2026a). His concern is not

AI is changing the value of knowledge-economy jobs, precisely the graduate pathways our school system has long been designed to deliver young people into

(Kohler, 2026b)

merely about job losses in the abstract. Writing for The New Daily in 2024, Kohler observed that AI is “a product that companies are selling to other companies and individuals to replace human labour”, a frank assessment of where the commercial incentives point (Kohler, 2024). And in March 2026, his ABC News analysis examined how AI is changing the value of knowledge-economy jobs, precisely the graduate pathways our school system has long been designed to deliver young people into (Kohler, 2026b).

The scale and pace of disruption AI is generating in the Australian community is measurable and growing. Rapid advances in AI have left eight in ten Australians concerned about what it could mean for their jobs (Kohler, 2026c). A Roy Morgan survey in October 2025 found that 65% of Australians believe artificial intelligence creates more problems than it solves, up eight percentage points since 2023, with job threats among the key concerns cited (Roy Morgan Research, 2025).

This uncertainty and anxiety generated from workplace disruption is not unfounded. In the United States, white-collar payrolls contracted for 31 consecutive months, a stretch without precedent outside of

recession in 70 to 80 years, according to Aaron Terrazas, former chief economist at Glassdoor (Quartz, 2026). Columbia Business School professor Daniel Keum, who studies AI in the workplace, is direct

about the cause: AI is currently replacing white-collar labour rather than augmenting it, because the cost differential makes headcount reduction commercially attractive (Quartz, 2026).

170
MILLION

new jobs are projected to be created globally by 2030 — but 92 million existing roles will be displaced.

(World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025)

Globally, the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects that while AI will create 170 million new roles by 2030, it will simultaneously displace 92 million existing ones (World Economic Forum, 2025). The net figure may appear positive. But net figures offer cold comfort to individuals, families and communities caught in the transition, particularly those whose skills and qualifications were built for a world that is rapidly changing around them. The WEF 2025 report, and the previous two reports, listed creative thinking, analytical thinking, resilience, leadership in the top five skills employers are seeking and will be needed to fill the new roles that are being

created. Organisations are less interested in academic qualifications and more interested in the human skills that augment AI.

The threat to employment, however, is only part of what AI is doing to our society. The threat to democracy may be equally serious, and schools can no longer afford to ignore it. Education has always had a democratic purpose alongside its economic one: to develop citizens capable of thinking critically, evaluating evidence, participating in public life, and sustaining the institutions on which a free society depends. That purpose is now under direct threat. AI-powered social media

platforms have created what Australian political communications expert Ed Coper, in his 2026 book *Angertainment*, calls an “outrage industry”, a system designed to harvest and monetise our worst impulses, in which anger is the primary currency of the attention economy. Algorithms do not reward truth, nuance or civic engagement. They reward outrage, contempt and the tribalism that keeps people scrolling. The result, Coper argues, is a civil discourse that is becoming increasingly extreme, a politics shaped by rage bait rather than reason, and a generation of young people whose understanding of the world is being formed in an environment deliberately engineered to inflame rather than inform. The skills required to navigate this environment, the capacity to evaluate sources, to tolerate complexity, to disagree without contempt, to reason rather than react, are precisely the capabilities that schools have always been best placed to develop, and precisely the capabilities that the standardising agenda has most consistently crowded out. An education worth having in the age of AI is not only one that prepares young people for the economy that is coming. It is one that prepares them to be citizens in the democracy we still want to have.

This is the economic and civic reality into which today’s Year 7 students will graduate. They will enter the workforce and take their full place in public life in the early 2030s, precisely the period in which AI’s impact on employment and on democracy is projected to be most acute.

TOP IN-DEMAND SKILLS

Creative thinking,

Analytical thinking,

Resilience,

Flexibility and agility,

Leadership and social influence

(World Economic Forum, June 2026)

The question that follows is both urgent and uncomfortable: what are we doing, right now, to prepare them with the skills and capabilities to be employable and to be citizens?

“Industry is saying that there are huge gaps and our kids are being blamed for the “lack of” skills.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

THE GAP BETWEEN INTENT AND REALITY

One could argue that the skills young people need in the age of AI are already embedded in our education system. The Australian Curriculum includes what are known as general capabilities, cross-disciplinary competencies intended to be developed alongside subject content. These include critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding, among others.

In principle, the argument is sound. Australia has, in fact, been among the leaders internationally in incorporating capabilities and competencies within a national curriculum. In practice, however, the gap between intent and reality is significant.

The general capabilities are woven into curriculum documentation as an expected dimension of good teaching, the assumption being that as teachers plan and deliver content, these capabilities will naturally emerge. But aspiration is not the same as design. In most classrooms, the translation of capabilities, particularly critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding from policy documents into actual student learning is left largely to chance. Unless a teacher

They are aspirational ornaments on a structure built for something else entirely.

possesses the specific pedagogical skills required to deliberately activate these capabilities and consciously designs learning experiences with that goal in mind, their development in students remains inconsistent at best, and invisible at worst.

It is important to be clear: the argument here is not that discipline-based learning is unimportant. Subject knowledge remains foundational. The question is not whether to teach mathematics, science, history or literature, but how learning within those disciplines can be designed to simultaneously develop the capabilities young people need. Capabilities are not a replacement for disciplines. They are developed through them.

The standardising discourse, with its emphasis on measurable outputs, high-stakes testing, and league tables, crowds out exactly the kind of teaching that would develop these capabilities. When NAPLAN results determine a school's reputation and an ATAR score determines a student's access to a university course, the general capabilities do not stand a chance. They are aspirational ornaments on a structure built for something else entirely.

"An education worth having is one that prepares a child not just for today's world, but for a future that will be shaped by rapid change, technology, and artificial intelligence. More importantly, I want my child to learn how to think, not simply what to think. I want them to be curious, to question assumptions, to evaluate information critically and to have the confidence to form their own reasoned views. Academic achievement matters, but character matters more."

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

As the enduring adage reminds us: we value what we measure, and measure what we value. In Australia, standardised testing has become extraordinarily high stakes. The pressure to achieve a strong ATAR dominates the secondary school experience, for students, teachers, schools, and parents alike. In that environment, capabilities that are not formally assessed are not formally valued. Time, energy, and institutional attention flow toward what is measured. The general capabilities, for all their presence in policy documents, receive almost none of it. The result is a system that articulates one set of values and rewards another.

The international evidence confirms that the lack of true focus on the teaching and assessment of capabilities is not a uniquely Australian problem, it is a structural failure

of modern education systems worldwide. A landmark 2020 study conducted by the Centre for Curriculum Redesign in collaboration with the Brookings Institution examined the prevalence of 21st century competencies across 22 jurisdictions in North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific, including Australia. The findings were dispiriting. While key competencies such as creativity and critical thinking appeared in curriculum documents across approximately 20 of those jurisdictions, including Australia, not one had developed the supporting pedagogies or assessment frameworks needed to ensure those competencies were taught, tracked, or evidenced in classrooms (Taylor et al., 2020). Professor Bill Lucas, Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester and co-founder of the global Rethinking Assessment

movement, reached the same conclusion through his own extensive review of curriculum and assessment systems. Writing in 2021, he was unambiguous: “Across the world, assessment is not working. We are not evidencing the kinds of dispositions and capabilities that society increasingly wants. Educational jurisdictions are placing too much reliance on high-stakes, standardised testing. They are testing the wrong things in the wrong ways” (Lucas, 2021). The aspiration is on the page. The practice is not in the classroom.

“Academic testing is entirely out of date. I appreciate it is the best worst option, but it really does not help in the 21st Century.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Many undergraduates are questioning the value of their degree because, on completion, they cannot find work.

(Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2025)

“[I want] an education that excites my child because, [one] that opens up their world rather than just remembering a bunch of stuff and forgetting it the next term.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Our obsession with the ATAR system is perhaps largely to blame for what is happening in classrooms. If university entrance requirements were broadened, moving beyond academic achievement alone to formally recognise character, capability and competency, the incentive-based structure of schooling would begin to shift. What universities signal they value, schools will teach. What schools assess; teachers will prioritise. What teachers prioritise; students will develop. This is precisely the territory that Professor Sandra Milligan and her team at the University of Melbourne have been working to transform. Through the New Metrics for Success research-practice partnership, Professor Milligan has developed rigorous approaches to assessing and credentialling capabilities, giving schools the tools to recognise the whole student, beyond their examination performance. Her work represents one of

the most significant advances in assessment design in education, globally.

However, the assumption that a university qualification leads to employment, is itself becoming more tenuous. According to the OECD and the World Economic Forum, the connection between credentials and labour market value is weakening. Skills requirements are evolving faster than education systems can respond, and

jobseekers are finding it increasingly difficult to demonstrate capabilities that employers are seeking and most in need of. Indeed, satisfaction rates among undergraduates across Australian universities have fallen from a peak of 80.6 per cent in 2020 to 74.9 per cent in 2025, with many graduates questioning the value of their degree because, on completion, they cannot find work (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2025).

“AI and digital technologies are changing how skills are valued and how learning happens, [and] education systems must adapt how they teach, assess and organise learning to remain relevant.”

World Economic Forum, June 2026

OUR DiMiNiSHiNG ABiLiTY TO THiNK CREATiVELY AND CRiTiCALLY

This paper, so far, has shown that if our children are to have a future and be employable in this new technological era, they will require capabilities that augment AI, competencies like creative thinking, analytical thinking, alongside resilience and skills in leadership (World Economic Forum, 2025). Our current curriculum, the design of our schools and learning and our incessant focus on standardisation, is largely leaving the development of these vital capabilities to chance. By and large, schools are currently not equipped with the necessary tools and pedagogy to embed and assess the vitally important (and in demand) competencies and skills young people now need to succeed. But the situation is perhaps even worse for our young people. AI in the hands of young people is diminishing their ability to think creatively and critically.

The human brain tends to conserve energy and minimise effort whenever possible. We naturally look for the easier path to accomplish tasks, and throughout history, we see the development and implementation of technologies that reduce mental effort (Susskind, in World Economic Forum, 2026, June).

“[I want an education] that equips children with critical thinking, adaptability, and emotional resilience, enabling them to navigate and thrive in an AI driven, rapid changing global workforce.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“However, an important distinction exists between tools that extend human cognition and those that replace it. When a student uses a calculator to check a complex mathematical computation, their mathematical understanding remains intact. When a student uses a LLM to reason through every step of a problem-solving process, the cognitive work that built understanding may simply not happen” (World Economic Forum, June 2026, p. 12). When we outsource our thinking to AI, we deprive our brains of the struggle through which understanding is built. As we increasingly use AI for tasks such as research and writing, our brains start losing the ability to complete these complex tasks. We are losing the ability to imagine and to think for ourselves.

Curiosity and imagination, both foundational prerequisites for creative intelligence and deep learning, also requires exercise. When students

consistently receive answers rather than working towards them, the desire to understand may also atrophy. Students who are not taught to be curious, or to think creatively and critically, but instead have intellectual problems solved for them by Claude or ChatGPT, may be less equipped and less inclined to think independently, retain information or to sit with the productive struggle of formulating ideas. The neuroscience is striking. MIT researchers wired students with EEG headsets and compared their brain activity when writing unaided versus when using ChatGPT. In the AI-assisted condition, neural connectivity in regions associated with memory and creativity dropped precipitously. Worse still, when those same students later tried to recall what they had written, many faltered, many could not paraphrase their own essays, let alone reconstruct key arguments (Kosmyrna et al., 2025). As Dr Neil Hopkin, Director of Education at Fortes Education, observed of these findings: what the electrodes captured in real time was a phenomenon every educator has seen, “learning without labour, output without imprint” (Hopkin, 2025).

The research is now substantial enough that the impact of outsourcing thinking is no longer a theoretical concern. Researchers have identified a phenomenon they term “cognitive offloading”, the tendency to delegate mental tasks to external tools, and found that it is strongly associated with measurable declines in critical thinking capability (Gerlich, 2025). In a study of

666 participants, Gerlich found that heavy AI use was negatively correlated with critical thinking scores, with cognitive offloading as the key mediating factor. The more we rely on AI to think, the less we practise thinking for ourselves, and the worse we become at it. A separate systematic review found that students who rely heavily on AI demonstrate substantial declines in analytical reasoning and reduced study motivation, a condition the researchers describe as a direct consequence of cognitive offloading (Jose et al., 2025).

This effect is not limited to students. A 2025 Microsoft Research study surveyed 319 knowledge workers across a range of professions and found that higher confidence in AI was associated with less critical thinking, while tasks delegated to AI were completed with measurably reduced cognitive engagement (Lee et al., 2025). The researchers noted a broader shift in thinking itself: rather than generating, analysing and evaluating ideas, workers increasingly focused on verifying and integrating AI-generated content, a fundamentally shallower cognitive task.

Learning without labour, output with imprint.

There is a further, subtler danger that goes beyond neural silence: homogenisation. Researchers at Cornell have shown how AI’s autocomplete and suggestion features funnel students towards a narrow band of expression; ideas converge, arguments flatten, the quirky edges of human voice are sanded down (Agarwal et al., 2025). When children lean too heavily on predictive models, their writing ceases to be an act of invention and becomes instead, as Hopkin puts it, “a performance of probability” (Hopkin, 2025). A generation of students may learn to write correctly without ever learning to write differently.

If adults in professional settings are losing cognitive capacity through AI dependence, the risks for children and adolescents, whose creative and critical thinking skills are still forming, are considerably greater. Younger participants are particularly susceptible to cognitive outsourcing effects due to developmental factors, meaning the students currently moving through our school system are not just losing practice. They may be losing the foundational capacity itself. Susan Schneider, philosopher of mind and AI ethicist, frames the stakes plainly: children’s executive functions, working memory and self-control, the very systems AI is so good at standing in for, are still under construction. “Take over the work and you are not merely helping; you are building the expectation that the bridge will always be there, so the brain never learns to span the gap” (Schneider, as cited in Hopkin, 2025).

The question for educators is therefore urgent: how can we design learning environments that build cognitive muscle and promote possibility?

“Creativity shouldn’t be a secondary subject with lack of time and resources. It should be taught every day.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“The entire school system needs to be changed to prepare children to be great humans.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Schools shouldn’t need to be looking to integrate AI into their current architecture by teaching young people how to ethically use AI (though this is important) or working out how to stop students cheating on assessments. Instead, schools should be allowed to be part of a broader conversation about the purpose of schooling in this current era. What can schools do about the cognitive impact of AI on thinking? How can they properly develop the capabilities young people need to have to thrive in an uncertain future? What is the purpose of schooling when many students are failing to complete university courses or choosing not to go to university for concern that their qualifications (at great expense) will be redundant on completion?

WHAT IS STOPPING CHANGE?

The diagnosis presented in Part 1 of this White Paper, that Australian schooling is structured for a world that no longer exists, that capabilities are left to chance rather than intentionally developed, and that AI is accelerating a crisis that was already decades in the making, is not new. Educators have been making versions of this argument for a long time. So why has so little changed?

Professor Reid’s analysis is instructive here. He argues that for three decades, policymakers in Australia have been in the grip of a standardising discourse, one so deeply embedded in the accountability infrastructure of schooling that it has become self-reinforcing. League tables require standardised measures. Standardised measures require standardised content. Standardised content crowds out the capabilities that cannot easily be measured. And so, the cycle continues, regardless of what curriculum documents say about general capabilities, and regardless of what employers, researchers and parents say they need (Reid, 2019).

Teachers know what students need. Many principals know what needs to change.

The voice of educators has not been sufficient to break the cycle of standardisation. Teachers know what students need. Many principals know what needs to change. But the system rewards what it measures, and it measures what the standardising agenda has decided to value. Professional advocacy, important as it is, has not shifted the policy settings. If change is to happen at the scale and speed that the moment demands, other voices need to be heard.

Policymakers have long insisted, in principle, that collaboration with parents and communities is essential to the educational endeavour. School systems produce parent engagement policies, schools hold parent information nights, and education departments consult communities on curriculum changes. But the substance of what schools teach and how they assess it has remained largely insulated from genuine community deliberation. Parents have been informed, not consulted. Engaged, not empowered.

If policymakers are genuinely committed to community partnership in education,

then the most logical step is to ask parents, directly and systematically, what they believe education should be for. ViVEDUS did exactly that. The Future Ready Schools Survey, a national study of 1,105 Australian parents of school-aged children conducted in 2026, set out to hear the parental voice on one of the most important questions facing Australian education: What is an education worth having in the age of AI?

What parents told us in the national survey was remarkable in its clarity and consistency. They are not asking for a return to basics. They are not asking schools to lower academic standards. They are asking for something more ambitious: schools that develop the whole child, children who can think independently, who are curious and creative, who are resilient enough to navigate a world shaped by AI, and who are capable of solving problems that have no predetermined answers.

The data, presented in full in Part 2 of this paper, tells a consistent story. Only 38 per cent of parents believe schools are preparing their children for a workforce

being transformed by AI. Seventy-five per cent believe that capabilities such as critical and creative thinking, resilience and problem solving should be prioritised alongside or ahead of academic achievement. Only 11.37 per cent are satisfied with what their child's school currently offers. And when asked what an education worth having means to them, parents across every sector of schooling, every state and territory, and every grade level converged on the same answer: an education that equips children to live well, adapt, think independently, contribute to society, and flourish in an uncertain future.

The parental voice is not an alternative to the educator's voice. It is a complement to it. Together, if policy makers listen to teachers and parents, they will hear that the voices point in the same direction. And together, they represent a constituency for genuine reform that is broader, and more ready, than policymakers may have assumed. The question is what to do with that constituency, how to organise it, how to give it weight, and how to ensure it shapes the decisions that determine what happens in Australian classrooms.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Professor Reid's most powerful contribution is not simply his diagnosis of what has gone wrong, but his insistence on how change must happen. He argues that education reform cannot be driven by government diktat or by the corporate reform models that have dominated the past three decades. It requires a genuine democratic process, an extended, ongoing community conversation involving educators, parents, the broader public and policymakers, working together to think through the problems and determine the directions. The scale and complexity of what is needed cannot be reduced to a ministerial announcement or a curriculum revision. Changing the fundamental architecture of an institution that has been essentially stable for 150 years in the middle of the fastest-moving technological transition in human history requires something closer to a citizens' assembly than a policy paper.

ONLY

11.37%

of parents said that they **were satisfied** with what their child's school currently offers.

Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

"We need our school leaders to think more broadly about the future of their students and the changing world they'll be entering - how can they help them succeed? I would like to see school leaders be able to think outside the box in making teaching and education that counts rather than become/stay a 'me too' school - a race to the leader boards for academics but not a lot of substance outside of that."

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

A citizens' assembly is a mechanism that has proved effective in several countries for resolving complex, contested social questions. A citizens' assembly is a structured deliberative process in which a group of people, selected to broadly represent the diversity of the population, are brought together to learn about, deliberate on, and make recommendations about a complex issue. Unlike parliamentary inquiries or government consultations, citizens' assemblies are not dominated by organised interest groups or constrained by political cycles. They are designed to reflect the considered views of ordinary people, given the time and information they need to engage seriously with difficult questions.

Citizens' assemblies have been used in Ireland to deliberate on abortion law reform and constitutional change, in Scotland to examine climate policy, and in France to address energy and environmental transitions. In each case, the mechanism produced recommendations with democratic legitimacy that conventional political processes had struggled to generate. The question of what Australian education should be for in the age of AI, genuinely complex, genuinely contested, and genuinely important, is precisely the kind of question that a citizens' assembly is designed to address.

Such an assembly would bring together parents, teachers, school leaders, students, industry representatives, researchers and community members to deliberate, over

Parents are ready to be part of the conversation

a sustained period, on the purposes of education in the twenty-first century, and on the practical steps required to realign the system with those purposes. It would not replace the role of government or curriculum authorities. It would inform and legitimise the decisions those authorities need to make, decisions of sufficient magnitude and consequence that they deserve a democratic foundation broader than any single election cycle can provide.

The data in Part 2 of this White Paper suggests that parents are ready to be part of a conversation. They are watching AI transform their own workplaces in real time. They are drawing their own conclusions about what that means for their children's education. And they are remarkably clear about what they want, not only academically capable children, but curious, resilient, independently thinking young people who know how to learn, how to solve problems that have no predetermined answers, and how to thrive in conditions that none of us can fully predict.

The urgency of the moment makes a wider conversation about education more, not less, necessary. We do not have the luxury of decades of incremental adjustment.

The students who are in Year 7 in 2026 will enter the workforce in the early 2030s, a period in which AI's impact on employment is projected to be most acute. The conversation cannot wait for the perfect conditions or the ideal political moment. It must begin now. And the data presented in this White Paper suggests that parents, the community most directly invested in the outcome, are ready to participate in it.

Once a new educational narrative has been developed through a process that reflects a genuine democratic consensus on what schooling should achieve for young Australians, policymakers at every level of the system should be held accountable for working towards it. Curriculum authorities should align their frameworks with it. Education departments should resource it. And school leaders should be supported, not merely encouraged, to implement it.

What follows (Part 2) is an analysis of what parents are saying is important for their children. The recommendations that follow Part 2 are offered in that spirit: as practical steps toward a system that is genuinely worthy of the hopes that every parent invests in it.

"I don't think schools or education leaders will ever understand what parents or children want, unfortunately. The curriculum is based on an institutional system over a century old. Home schooling our kids is looking tempting to us."

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

"We want to have our children world ready. We have stagnated in a 50-year-old model which is proven to be going backwards."

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

"Please get ahead of the curve."

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

"We want our child to HAVE a future. Let's start there."

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

PART 2: DEMAND FOR CHANGE

WHAT PARENTS ARE WANTING FROM EDUCATION

The Future
Ready Schools
Survey full
research report

The following section presents the methodology, quantitative findings, and qualitative analysis of the Future Ready Schools Survey conducted by ViVEDUS in 2026.



1105
TOTAL
RESPONSES

59%
GOVERNMENT
SCHOOL
FAMILIES

K-12
YEAR LEVELS
REPRESENTED

METHODOLOGY

ViVEDUS carried out a national survey of parents of school-aged children to hear their voice on the future of education. The core question parents were asked was, “What is an education worth having in the age of AI?”

The survey investigated the views of Australian parents and legal guardians of school-aged children enrolled in primary and secondary schools (Prep/Foundation to Year 12) across the government, Catholic and independent school sectors. The target population comprised approximately 4.5 million parents of school-aged children in Australia, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates.

Data were collected over a 30-day period using an anonymous online survey administered through SurveyMonkey¹ and Pureprofile². Participants were recruited through targeted social media advertising (18% of responses) and established online research panels, including Prolific³ (28% of responses) and Pureprofile (54% of responses). Panel respondents received standard compensation for their participation, in line with usual research panel practice. Participation was voluntary, and SurveyMonkey and Pureprofile settings restricted respondents to a single survey submission.

A total of 1,105 completed responses, representing students across all grade levels, all sectors of schooling (government

¹ SurveyMonkey is a widely used online survey platform that enables organisations and researchers to design, distribute and securely collect survey responses

² Pureprofile is an Australian market research platform that connects researchers and organisations with a large panel of verified participants, enabling the collection of high-quality survey data for academic, government and commercial research.

³ Prolific, founded by researchers at the University of Oxford, Prolific is a globally recognised research participant recruitment platform widely used by universities and organisations to recruit high-quality participants for behavioural, social science and market research.

(58.68%), and Catholic and independent (39.39%)), and all States and Territories were included in the final analysis. The survey required an average completion time of 5 minutes and 44 seconds and comprised 13 questions. Questions 1–6 and Question 8 were quantitative questions asking respondents to select or rank responses. Questions 7 and 9 invited written responses, providing qualitative insights into parents’ perspectives. Questions 10–13 collected demographic information.

To ensure data integrity, responses were screened for quality prior to inclusion in the final dataset, with incomplete responses

and those displaying patterns indicative of inattentive responding removed.

No statistical weighting was applied to correct the achieved sample to ABS population benchmarks. The achieved sample size of 1,105 provides a margin of error of approximately ± 2.95 percentage points at the 95% confidence level under simple random sampling assumptions. While the survey employed a mixed recruitment strategy rather than probability sampling, the achieved sample size is comparable to that used in many national public opinion surveys, providing a high degree of confidence in the reliability of aggregate national findings.

Figure 1. Respondent profile by school sector

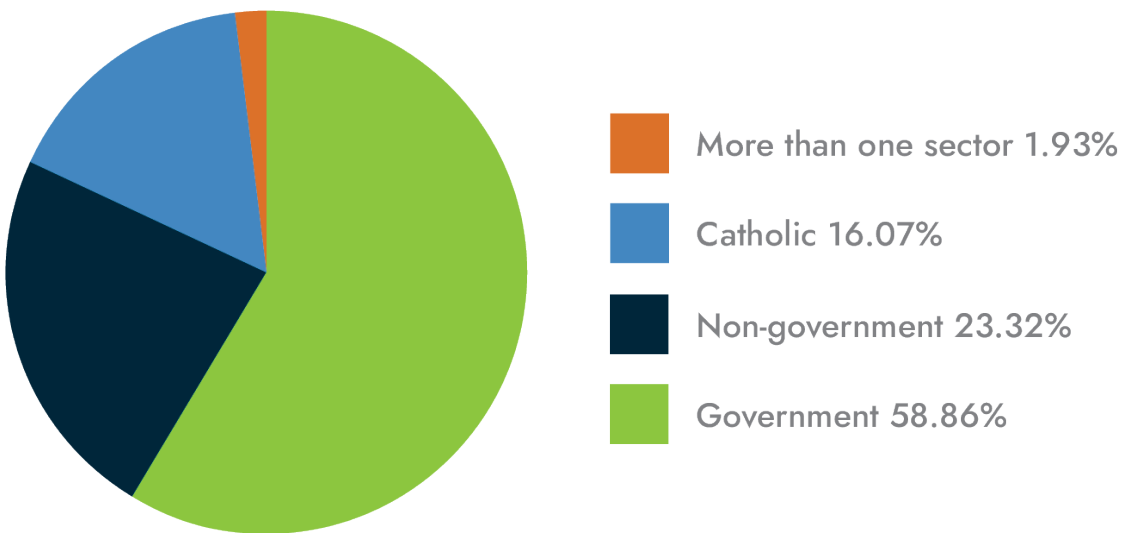
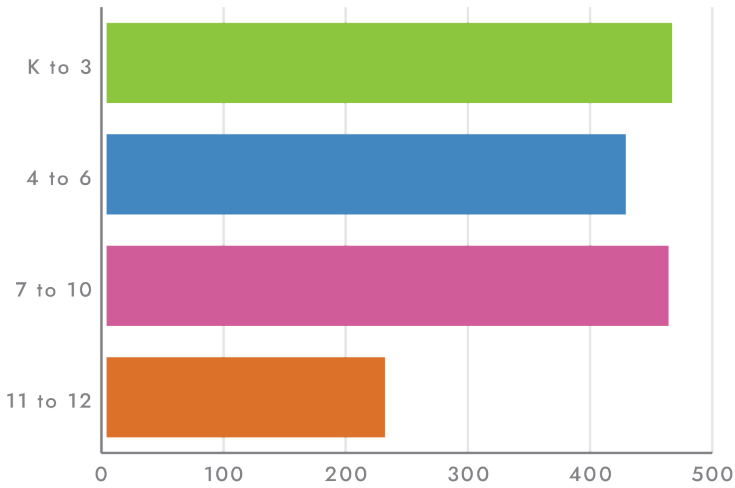


Figure 2. Respondent profile by child’s level of schooling



56%
**JUNIOR
SCHOOL
FAMILIES**

DiSCLOSURE

The Future Ready Schools Survey was designed, commissioned and funded by ViVEDUS to better understand Australian parents’ expectations of schooling in the age of artificial intelligence. ViVEDUS also conducted the analysis presented in this White Paper.

Recognising that the organisation has a professional interest in educational innovation and school improvement, the survey was designed to minimise

bias through anonymous participation, standardised administration, transparent reporting of methodology, and the inclusion of all substantive findings, whether or not they aligned with ViVEDUS’ views. No responses were excluded on the basis of their content. Responses were excluded only where they failed pre-defined data quality criteria, including incompleteness, duplication, or indicators of inattentive responding.

RESULTS

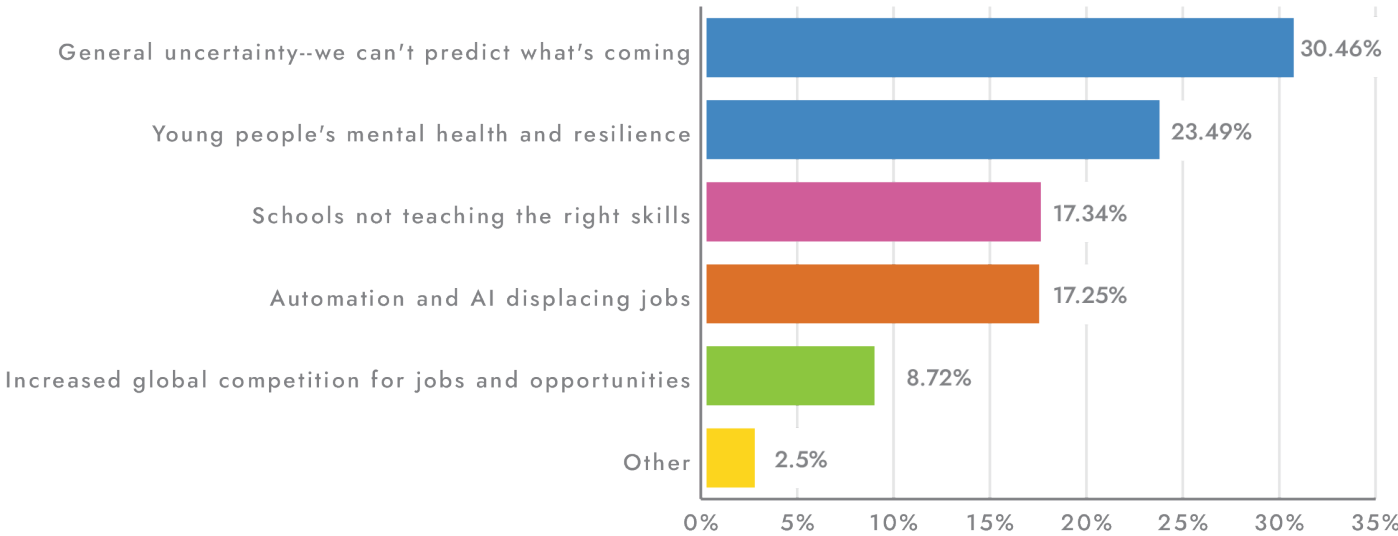
WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING

Question 1: What worries parents most about the world their children will enter?

Parents are worried about their children’s future, but the nature of those worries may be very different from what they were a decade ago. The data show that parents’ primary concern about the world their children will enter when they finish school is the general uncertainty: we cannot predict what is coming. Their second concern is their child’s mental health and resilience, followed by schools not

teaching the right skills and automation and AI displacing jobs. A decade ago, concerns about artificial intelligence and job displacement were largely absent from parental thinking, reinforcing the significance of understanding how rapidly perceptions and expectations around education and the future of work are now shifting.

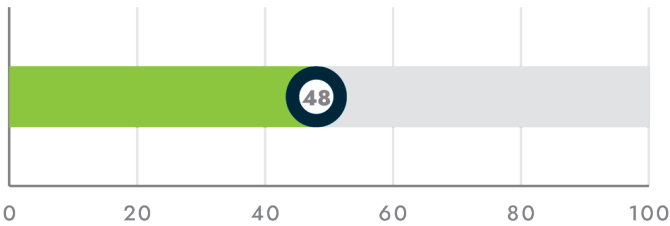
Figure 3: Parents’ greatest concerns about their child’s future



Question 2: Concern about AI and employment

When it comes to concern about AI significantly disrupting employment for their child’s generation, 48 per cent of parents are concerned.

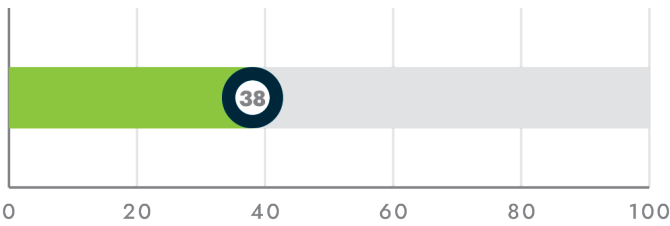
Figure 4. Parents’ level of concern about AI disrupting future employment opportunities



Question 3: Confidence in schools

Only 38.04 per cent of parents are confident that their child’s school is preparing them for the future workforce being transformed by the large-scale uptake of artificial intelligence.

Figure 5. Parents’ confidence that schools are preparing students for the future workforce



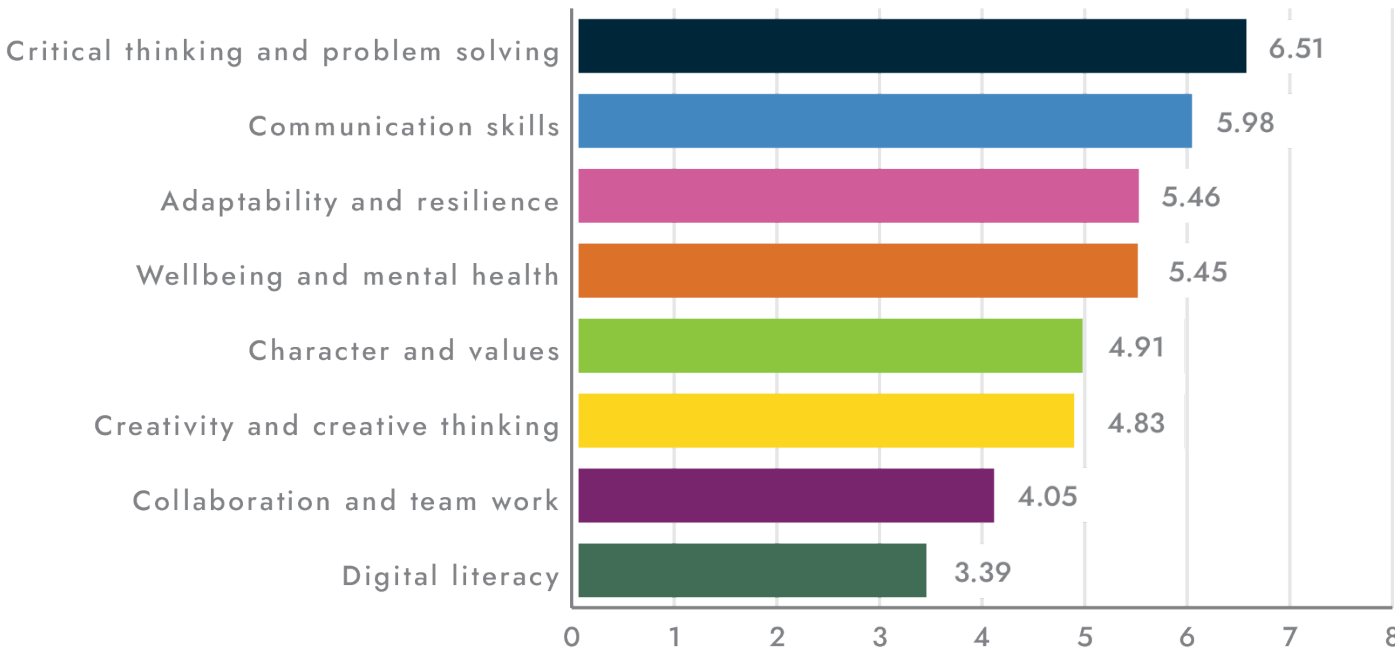
38/100

Parents’ confidence that schools are preparing students for the future workforce.

Question 4: What outcomes matter most, beyond academic achievement?

Question 4 asked parents, assuming academic development and achievement was a given, to rank eight other outcomes that are important to them. The most desirable additional outcome is for their child to develop the capacity for critical thinking and problem solving.

Figure 6. Parent rankings of the most important outcomes of schooling beyond academic achievement



These findings provide clear evidence that parents want schools to prioritise learning how to learn and problem solving, alongside the development of communication skills, wellbeing and mental health, and adaptability and resilience.

It is important to note that, for the purposes of the survey, thinking was intentionally presented as two separate capabilities, critical thinking and creative thinking. However, it is important to note that the notion of creative thinking is broadly misunderstood by the general population, which the data highlighted. If participants

It is the combination of deep creative thinking and critical thinking that enables young people to analyse complex problems, generate innovative ideas, evaluate alternatives and develop creative solutions.

were asked to consider the dispositions that are necessary for creative thinking, dispositions like: curiosity, flexibility, perceptive to multiple possibilities, being courageous and experimental, they would more than likely say, yes, these are dispositions we wish for our child. The broader academic literature is clear that effective problem solving depends on the integration of critical and creative thinking. While critical thinking enables learners to analyse evidence, evaluate arguments and make reasoned judgements, creative thinking enables them to generate alternatives, imagine possibilities and develop innovative solutions. This is reflected in the Australian Curriculum, which recognises these complementary processes through the combined General Capability of Critical and Creative Thinking (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.).

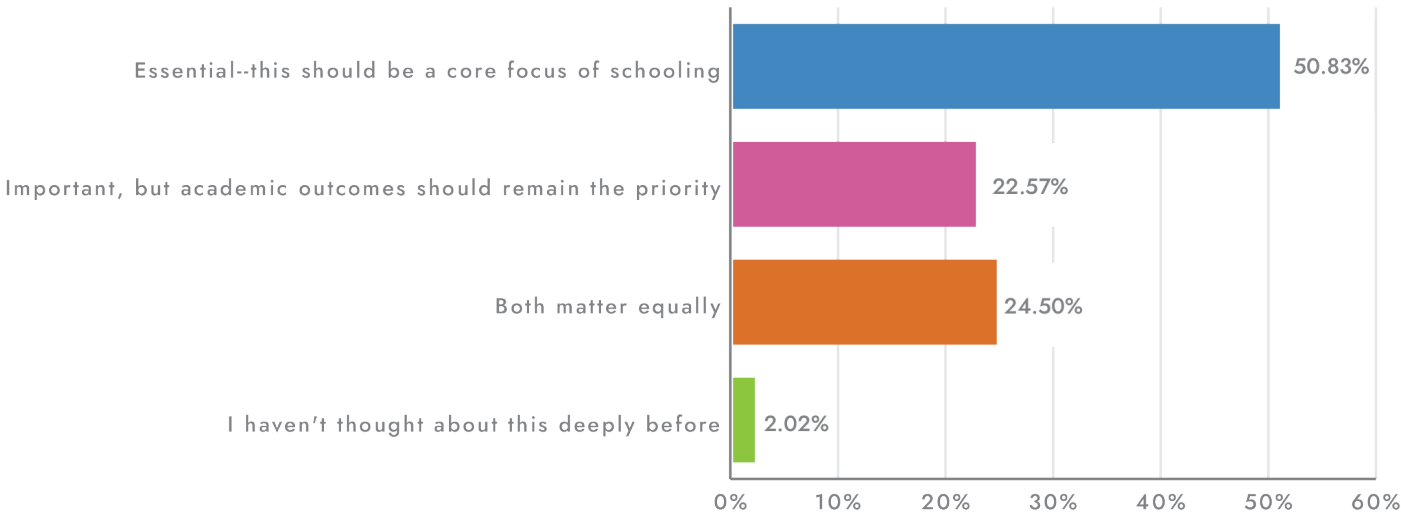
The challenge facing school learning is not to strengthen critical thinking or creativity in isolation, but to develop students' capacity to integrate both. It is the combination of deep creative thinking and critical thinking that enables young people to analyse complex problems, generate innovative ideas, evaluate alternatives and develop creative solutions. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report consistently identifies creative thinking, analytical thinking, and complex problem solving among the most in-demand workforce skills. An over-emphasis on critical thinking, which is often the case, at the expense of creativity, is no longer sufficient.

Question 5: Should these capabilities be prioritised over academic attainment?

Parents were asked whether skills such as creative and critical thinking and the development of resilience, values and character should be explicitly taught in schools, and how these should be prioritised relative to academic attainment. The findings are decisive: 75.32% of parents believe these capabilities should be prioritised over academic results (50.83%) or given equal priority (24.5%).

75.32% of parents believe these capabilities should be prioritised over academic results

Figure 7. Importance of intentionally teaching future-ready capabilities at school



Only 22.57% of parents believe academic outcomes should remain the primary focus.

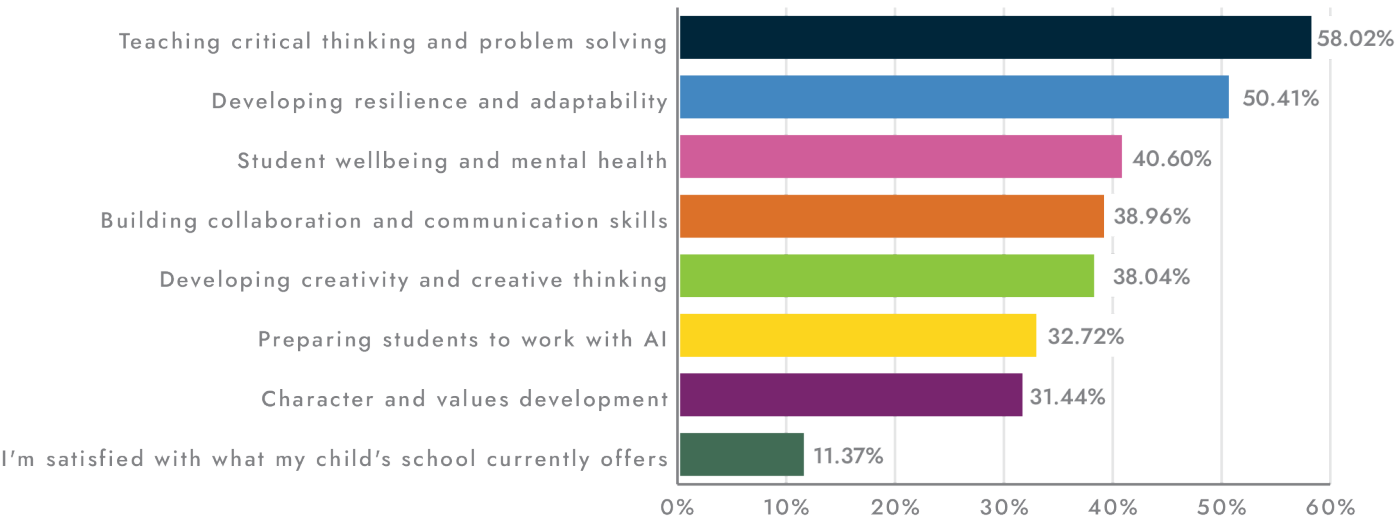
This result indicates a strong expectation from parents that schooling should extend beyond content recitation and the focus on academic attainment to the deliberate development of broader capabilities that prepare young people for an uncertain future.

Question 6: Which skills should schools emphasise more?

When asked which specific skills they would like schools to emphasise more, parents identified a consistent set of priorities. The most frequently selected areas were critical thinking and problem solving, followed by resilience and adaptability, and then student wellbeing and mental health.

Together, these responses demonstrate a coherent pattern: parents want schools to be doing much more and want them to prioritise higher-order cognitive and adaptive skills that align closely with the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Figure 8. Areas where parents would like schools to place greater emphasis

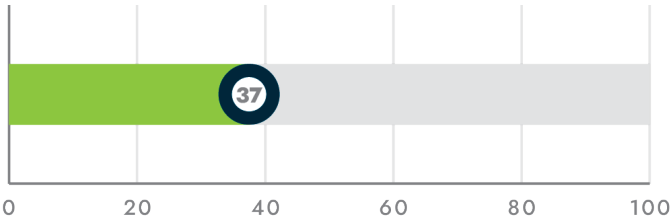


Only 11.37% of parents said that they were satisfied with what their child's school currently offers.

Question 8: Are schools currently delivering on these priorities?

Just 37.64 per cent of parents agreed that their child’s school is effectively developing these skills and qualities.

Figure 9. Parents’ perceptions of how well schools are delivering broader educational outcomes



37/100

Parents confidence that their child’s school is effectively developing these skills and qualities

This finding suggests a significant perception gap between what parents’ value and what they believe schools are currently achieving. In most school systems, academic achievement remains the primary formally assessed and reported outcome. By contrast, the development of skills such as creative thinking and resilience is rarely measured with consistency or visibility across schools. As a result, parents may be forming judgements based on indirect indicators rather than systematically reported evidence.

This disconnect highlights an issue for schools and education authorities: if capabilities such as creative thinking and resilience are increasingly seen as priorities by global think tanks like the WEF, employers and parents, yet are not consistently assessed or made visible, it becomes difficult for schools to demonstrate progress or for parents to evaluate it with confidence. Schools have the potential to lead the way in the reform that is needed by looking to frameworks and assessment strategies that broaden what is currently included on a standard school report.

THE QUALITATIVE FINDINGS
PARENTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Two open-ended questions were asked.

Question 7 asked: “What does ‘an education worth having’ mean to you?” Question 9 asked: “Is there anything else you would like schools or education leaders to understand about what parents want for their children’s future?” Together, 1080 and 1029 responses were received respectively. What follows is a thematic analysis of those responses.

Question 7: What is an education worth having?

The qualitative responses to Question 7 converge on a clear and remarkably coherent picture. Perhaps the most significant finding is what parents did not say.

Very few parents defined “an education worth having” in terms of examination results, university entrance scores or academic achievement alone. Instead, parents consistently described education as something that equips children to live well, adapt, think independently, contribute to society, and flourish in an uncertain future.

Taken together, these responses reveal a conception of education that is

Parents increasingly expect schools to develop the human capabilities—critical and creative thinking

considerably broader than traditional measures of school success. Parents see academic knowledge as an important foundation, but they increasingly expect schools to develop the human capabilities—critical and creative thinking, resilience, character, adaptability and practical life skills, that enable young people to thrive in a rapidly changing world. This qualitative finding strongly reinforces the quantitative results elsewhere in the survey, where parents consistently ranked these capabilities alongside, or above, academic achievement as priorities for schooling.

The responses also signal a growing parental anxiety about AI and technology, not necessarily hostility, but a genuine concern that the cognitive capacities schools should be building are being eroded rather than strengthened.

Theme 1: Real-world readiness

This was by far the dominant theme, appearing in well over half of all responses. Parents consistently expressed frustration that schooling feels disconnected from life after graduation, whether that means employment, financial independence, or simply functioning as an adult.

“To me, education doesn’t mean being able to remember facts and dates, it is being able to think for yourself and question things... it’s about teaching kids how to fail without getting upset, it’s about teaching them to find the answers themselves instead of just believing anything AI tells them.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“One that is enjoyable, meaningful, engaging and inspiring. One that instils a love of learning.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 2: Employability and career readiness

Closely related to Theme 1 but distinct in emphasis. A substantial cohort of parents frames the purpose of education almost entirely in terms of employment outcomes; getting a good job, accessing stable income, and securing financial independence. For many respondents this is the primary definition of value.

“An education that can get you a job when you leave school, otherwise what good is school.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“An education that prepares you to be employable and to be adaptable.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 3: Creative and critical thinking over rote learning

A very strong third theme was the call for creative and critical thinking over rote learning. Parents across the country were remarkably consistent: they don’t want their children to memorise facts. They want them to think, question, analyse, and problem-solve independently.

“An education worth having means learning things that actually help a child become capable, curious, confident, and decent. Not just memorising facts for tests, but building practical skills, critical thinking, resilience, creativity, and the ability to work well with others.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“An education worth having is one where you learn how to learn. It should promote critical thinking, curiosity and resilience, and foster a lifetime love of learning.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“An education that teaches our future generations how to think, not what to think. It ignites lifelong creativity, curiosity and fosters emotional intelligence.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 4: Adaptability and future-readiness in a changing world

Many parents explicitly named AI, technological change and an unpredictable future as the context for their answer. There is widespread awareness that the world their children will graduate into is fundamentally different, and that schools are not keeping pace.

“An education worth having is one that prepares a child not just for today’s world, but for a future that will be shaped by rapid change, technology and artificial intelligence. More importantly, I want my child to learn how to think, not simply what to think.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“One that can be taken into the real world — it’s evolving and changing, but honestly the schools are falling further and further behind.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 5: Holistic development — the whole child, not just academic achievement

A substantial cohort of parents pushed back explicitly against academic performance as the primary measure of educational success. They want schools to develop character, values, emotional intelligence and mental health alongside academic skills.

“One that has developed a young man who is kind, curious, confident, independent, resilient and tolerant, who is able to find joy in what he does in life.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“A well rounded, happy student that goes on to achieve things that make them happy. Less focus on academic success and more focus on mental health.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“It means having an education that is holistic, nourishing and tailored to the individual and their interests, that teaches them how to think, not what to think.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 6: Concern that schools are falling behind, and a desire for reform

A recurring undercurrent of frustration, occasionally sharp. Many parents feel the current system is outdated, one-size-fits-all, and not responsive to their child’s individual needs or the realities of the modern world.

“Can we rethink the dinosaur age approach we now have in education?”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“So much of school is outdated and exists in the analogue age.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“I don’t believe schools or the education departments realise what employers actually think of ‘education’. I currently believe schools are completely and utterly detached from the real world.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Question 9: What else should schools and education leaders understand?

The responses to Question 9 reinforce and sharpen the Question 7 findings, with important additions. Parents are not just describing what a good education looks like in the abstract, they name specific systemic failures: a curriculum that hasn’t moved in decades, the absence of financial literacy, inadequate mental health support, and a school culture that protects children from struggle rather than equipping them for it. The AI theme is more specific here than in Question 7, with parents explicitly naming cognitive dependence as a concern. And a relational theme, the breakdown of trust and partnership between parents and schools, emerges much more strongly, suggesting that any reform agenda must address not just what schools teach, but how they engage with the communities they serve.

Theme 1: The curriculum is outdated and disconnected from real life

The single most dominant theme across the entire dataset. Parents are frustrated, sometimes bluntly so, that what schools teach does not match the world their children will be challenged to navigate. The word “real” appears in dozens of responses. There is a strong sense that the system is still preparing children for a world that no longer exists.

“We have stagnated in a 50-year-old model which is proven to be going backwards.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“In 2026 we need a curriculum that is built for the 21st century and not one that more closely resembles the requirements of Prussian soldiers or factory workers.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“Educational curriculums fail to be agile and rely on dated pedagogical theories and frameworks. The world has changed. Skills considered as foundational have changed.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 2: AI — acknowledge it, teach it, but don’t let it replace thinking

AI generated more direct commentary in Question 9 than in Question 7, and the responses reveal a genuine tension. Parents are split, roughly, into three camps: those who want schools to embrace AI as a tool children need to master; those who are worried about over-reliance eroding cognitive independence; and a smaller group who want AI actively limited. All three camps agree on one thing: schools cannot ignore it.

“AI is here to stay. Don’t treat it as something that you can put aside.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“Just for kids to be free thinkers. This generation is not able to think for themselves as they are using ChatGPT for everything.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“How to question and analyse information provided by AI or on the web — instead of AI being viewed as cheating, how can schools encourage its use in a positive and meaningful way? Because it will be part of all future employment.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“AI should make us work effectively and efficiently, not make us smarter. Take that message to kids. They are smarter when they can teach the AI their mistakes, not the other way round.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 3: Mental health and wellbeing must be treated as a precondition, not an add-on

A strong and emotionally urgent theme. Many parents do not frame wellbeing as a “nice to have” alongside academic learning. They frame it as the precondition for learning itself. Several responses carry real pain about children who are not coping, and a sense that schools are not adequately equipped to help.

“School life has a significant impact on the entire development of each student. Whether a school environment is healthy, or toxic absolutely alters the entire path of a person’s life.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“I want a happy child. A smart child would be good too, but I really care that my child is getting cared for at school... if they are struggling, don’t throw test results in their faces. Help them. Encourage them.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

“Wanting safety to be the number one priority. Physical and mental.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

Theme 4: The parent-school relationship, trust is the foundation

A smaller but powerful cluster of responses touched on the relationship between parents and schools itself. The dominant feeling is disconnection: parents feel managed rather than partnered with, and several noted that this, or the breakdown of trust undermines everything else.

The most striking response in the entire dataset deserves to be quoted at length:

“The thing I want most is also the most basic: I want the school to seek to know my child. Not their results. Not their behaviour file. My child. What makes them curious, what they find hard, what lights them up... That kind of knowing is the foundation of everything else, and most school structures work against it... What I’m asking for isn’t more access to manage my child’s performance. I’m asking to be in relationship with the people who spend significant time with my child... Parents will accept a great deal — new approaches, unconventional methods, imperfect outcomes — when they trust the institution and the people in it. That trust isn’t built in formal communications. It’s built in small, genuine moments of contact. Schools need parents and volunteers as much as we need schools. They were the centre of our communities and need to be restored to the centre.”

Survey respondent, Future Ready Schools Survey 2026

RECOMMENDATIONS

The data in this White Paper are not ambiguous. Australian parents are telling us, clearly and consistently, that the education their children are receiving needs to adapt to the current circumstance. The research confirms what parents' sense. What follows are recommendations directed at those with the power and responsibility to act, from those who set the national agenda to those who open the school gates each morning.

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND POLICYMAKERS

1. Establish a national citizens' assembly on the future of education

A ministerial review or a departmental working group is not equal to the scale of what is needed. The challenge of redesigning education for the age of AI requires a genuine democratic mandate, one that cannot be claimed by government alone. We recommend the establishment of a National Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education, bringing together parents, educators, students, industry leaders, economists, and community representatives in a structured, facilitated process to deliberate on what Australian education should be for and what it must become. As Professor Alan Reid has argued, changing a centuries-old system requires more than policy directives; it requires a new national narrative built through genuine public participation (Reid, 2019). This assembly should be charged with producing a framework for reform that carries democratic legitimacy across political cycles.

2. Broaden university entry requirements beyond academic achievement

The ATAR is not merely an assessment tool, it is the most powerful curriculum lever in the country. What it measures, schools will teach. What it ignores, schools will deprioritise. If the capabilities young people need in an AI-enabled economy, creative and analytical thinking, resilience, and leadership are to be genuinely developed in schools, they must be formally recognised in university entry pathways. We recommend that the Australian Government direct Universities Australia to develop and pilot alternative entry frameworks that formally credential the general capabilities alongside academic achievement, drawing on work already underway through the University of Melbourne's New Metrics for Success project. This single reform would do more to shift what happens in classrooms than any curriculum document revision.

3. Commission a national review of AI's impact on cognitive development in young Australians

The neuroscientific evidence presented in this paper, particularly the MIT Media Lab findings on cognitive debt and the research on cognitive offloading, raises questions of national significance about the developmental impact of AI on Australian children. We recommend the commissioning of a longitudinal Australian study, led by an independent research body, to examine how AI use in educational and domestic settings is affecting the cognitive development, creative capacity and independent thinking of children and adolescents. This evidence base should directly inform both curriculum design and the regulation of AI tools marketed to or used by minors. We are only just realising the negative effects of social media and trying to put in measures after 'horse has bolted', let's not make the same mistake again.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS AND SYSTEM LEADERS

4. Elevate the general capabilities from aspiration to assessed reality

The Australian Curriculum's general capabilities, including critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, and ethical understanding, have existed in policy documents for over a decade. They have not been consistently taught, and they have not been meaningfully assessed. Education departments must move beyond aspirational curriculum language to mandate, resource and assess these capabilities with the same rigour currently applied to literacy and numeracy. This requires investment in teacher professional development, in assessment design, and in reporting frameworks that make capability development visible to parents, students and school leaders alike.

5. Redefine what 'school performance' means

Current school accountability frameworks, including MySchool and NAPLAN, measure a narrow band of academic performance and inadvertently signal to schools, parents and the community what education is for. Education departments should expand performance reporting to include school-level data on the development of future-ready capabilities, student wellbeing, and post-school readiness. Schools that deliberately and demonstrably develop the whole child, not merely the examination candidate, should be recognised and resourced accordingly. Tools and frameworks already exist to support this shift; what is required is the institutional will to deploy them at scale.

6. Develop AI literacy guidelines that protect cognitive development

Education departments have a responsibility to ensure that AI tools adopted in schools are pedagogically sound, not merely technically capable. We recommend the development of national AI in Education guidelines that draw explicitly on the neuroscientific evidence around cognitive offloading, cognitive debt and developmental vulnerability. These guidelines should establish clear principles: that AI in learning must function as provocation rather than shortcut; that students must retain ownership of the cognitive work; and that assessment tasks must be designed to ensure the struggle, the retrieval, the reflection, the drafting, remains the student's own. Should there be an AI ban for under 16, not unlike the social media ban?

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

7. Convene a parent assembly, and mean it

The data in this White Paper make clear that parents have a sophisticated, coherent and largely unheard view of what education should be. They are not asking schools to lower academic standards. They are asking schools to broaden their vision of what a successful young person looks like. Every school leader should convene a genuine parent assembly, not a consultation exercise, not an information evening, but a structured forum in which parents are invited to deliberate on the school's educational priorities, to surface what they value and what concerns them. Trust, as one parent in this survey put it, is not built in formal communications. It is built in small, genuine moments of contact.

8. Audit what your school actually teaches, and what it doesn't

Most school strategic plans include language about developing critical thinkers, resilient learners and creative problem solvers, and for good reason. These are precisely the capabilities parents are asking for and the economy is demanding. We recommend that every school leader conduct an honest audit of how much time, pedagogical energy and formal assessment is devoted to the development of these capabilities, as distinct from content delivery and examination preparation. That audit will almost certainly open a door: to an energising conversation with staff, students and parents about how a school already committed to these values can bring its practice into fuller alignment with its vision, and in doing so, position itself at the leading edge of what education is becoming.

9. Bring industry into the school

Parents are not the only voices schools need to hear. The employers who will receive this generation of graduates have an increasingly urgent perspective on what young people need and it does not always align with what schools are currently producing. School leaders should establish structured relationships with local, regional and industry partners, inviting them into curriculum design conversations, into mentoring programs, and into the school's own deliberative forums. Industry leaders who are already navigating the AI transition in real time have direct and valuable knowledge about which human capabilities remain irreplaceable and that knowledge should be shaping what schools teach.

10. Start now, within your current authority

Systemic change is slow. Citizens' assemblies take time to convene. Policy reform takes years to implement. But school leaders do not need to wait. The most important decisions about what a school values, what it celebrates, what it assesses, how it talks to parents, how it designs learning, are made at the school level, every day. Schools that are already deliberately building and assessing valuable competencies alongside content, that are creating genuine partnerships with parents and industry, are demonstrating that it is possible without waiting for permission. Tools and approaches to support this work exist. School leaders can lead this work. ViVEDUS exists precisely to support that work, providing schools with the frameworks, tools, and evidence base to make future-ready learning a reality for every student, not an aspiration in a strategic plan.

A FINAL WORD: RIDING THE WAVE

The title of this White Paper is borrowed from a parent survey respondent: “We want our child to HAVE a future. Let’s start there.” It is both a plea and a provocation. It reminds us that behind every data point in this report is a child, a family, and a set of hopes that no algorithm can quantify. The recommendations above are offered in that spirit, not as a blueprint imposed from above, but as an invitation to the conversation that Australian education urgently needs to have.

Artificial intelligence is not a distant disruption to be managed in the years ahead. It is here, reshaping industries, redefining roles, and raising urgent questions about what it means to be educated, skilled and employable. It is, to borrow a metaphor from Ambrose (2016), a gigantic wave, already breaking. The question is not whether it will reach us. The question is whether we will find ourselves beneath it, or on top of it.

If AI is capable of performing the kinds of standardised cognitive tasks that our education system has spent decades optimising students to perform, then an education built around those tasks is not preparing young people for the future. It is preparing them for a competition they cannot win, against tools that will not tire, will not complain, and will not ask for a pay rise.

Parents of school-aged children recognise the disruption underway. They are watching AI transform their own workplaces in real time. They are drawing their own conclusions about what that means for their children’s education. And they know, with the particular clarity that comes from genuinely caring about someone’s future, that something needs to change.

The data in this White Paper gives voice to that knowing. An education worth having in an AI world is different to the one happening in most schools right now. It is one that not only teaches content, but that also teaches and assesses the capabilities and dispositions that make a person human, unique and employable. And above all, it is one that gives rise to a future filled with hope and possibility. Schools are ideally situated to address this challenge. By seeking ways to both value and bring future-ready competencies, and the innately human qualities of creativity, curiosity, and connection, to life for every learner, we can provide Generation Alpha with an education worth having in the age of AI.

The wave is breaking.

The only question is who will be on top of it.

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