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Expert Panel

Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Via email: [NSRA.submissions@education.gov.au](mailto:NSRA.submissions@education.gov.au)

Dear Dr O'Brien

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* Consultation Paper.

The ACT Government appreciates the Expert Panel's (the Panel) acknowledgment of the important role that states and territories play in leading the delivery of school education in Australia.

The attached ACT Government Submission responds generally to themes within Consultation Paper, ensuring the Panel is aware of areas the ACT Government sees as most likely to have positive outcomes for the children and young people learning in our schools.

The ACT Government is committed to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration to ensure all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community. To achieve this, governments must collectively ensure jurisdictions and systems deliver schooling that promotes excellence through equity.

Enabling equitable education is complex. Australia's diverse landscape and different communities require solutions developed in partnership with stakeholders and communities at a localised level.

The next National School Reform Agreement should focus on evidence-based reforms that are: collaborative, measured and consistent with state and territory governments' constitutional responsibility for education; workable across jurisdictions and systems; and do not create unnecessary compliance burdens for our expert education workforce.

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The aim to improve and embed equity in the ACT education system is being delivered locally through our [Future of Education Strategy](#). The development of this strategy was undertaken through deep and open dialogue with the ACT community over a year and a half, and the ACT Government is accountable to them for delivery of this.

I trust that the Expert Panel will find the ACT Government submission useful in your deliberations and I encourage you to embrace a spirit of being bold and ambitious in your final recommendations.

Yours sincerely



Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA  
A/g Minister for Education and Youth Affairs  
22 August 2023

# Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

## Consultation Paper

ACT Government  
Submission

2023

The ACT Government thanks the Expert Panel for the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*.

The ACT Government's submission highlights five focus areas to inform the Expert Panel's recommendations for the next national school reform agreement (the agreement):

- 1. Achieving equity:** The reforms must target systemic barriers to educational attainment for those students experiencing educational disadvantage, being cognisant of and seeking to enhance the existing work of jurisdictions.
- 2. Local flexibility:** The reforms must be practical, responsive to contextual needs and empower the jurisdictions, school leaders and communities who will lead their delivery.
- 3. Meaningful targets and accountability:** Targets must be meaningful and relevant to local schools. Accountability measures must be efficient to reduce the workload burden associated with monitoring and data collection.
- 4. Strong partnerships for wellbeing:** While the focus on mental health and wellbeing is appreciated, the primary emphasis should be on fostering collaborative community partnerships that offer comprehensive support services to students, without overburdening educators.

In addition, the ACT Government believes that the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* serves as an appropriate platform for collaborative efforts to address workforce challenges. The ACT is taking its role in the national teacher attraction landscape seriously, ensuring our latest *Education Directorate (Teaching Staff) Enterprise Agreement 2023 – 2026* included nation-leading pay for public school teachers and workload reduction measures.

Collaborative national action to improve numeracy skills, essential for preparing students for roles in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is also needed.

While the Consultation Paper covers various important topics, some questions need reframing to focus discussions on reforms that can be best achieved through coordinated national action. The submission concludes by proposing additional questions for the Expert Panel to consider during the development of their final report.

## **ACT Context**

The ACT has a unique education system with a strong history of innovation and reform focused on achieving equity.

Our growing public school system provides education to over 51,000 children and young people in Canberra through 90 public schools. Additionally, there are over 31,000 children and young people attending 47 non-government schools in the ACT, comprising 29 Catholic systemic schools and 18 independent schools.

The ACT Education Directorate leads the ACT education system in alignment with the Government's [Future of Education Strategy](#) 2018-2028, and its principles of equity, agency, access and inclusion.

## National Reform Principles

The ACT Government views the agreement as a unique chance to foster national collaboration for long-term education reform.

To achieve lasting reform, proposed reforms must be practical and meet the following key principles. Reforms should:

- have a genuine focus on equity;
- require national action;
- ensure actions are taken at the appropriate level (subsidiarity);
- enable contextualisation by jurisdictions;
- be informed by robust evidence;
- focus on key enablers for improved educational outcomes;
- have a strong cost benefit proposition;
- be efficient and reduce workloads; and
- be tested through robust engagement with key stakeholders.

If reform proposals are aligned with these principles, they are more likely to enable lasting education reform.

## FOCUS AREAS

### 1. Maintaining a National Focus on Equity

Children and young people in Australia deserve an education system that achieves excellence through equity. National reform must focus on enabling states, territories, systems and schools to deliver reforms that achieve this.

The ACT Government agrees that education transforms lives and that Australian governments and communities have a collective challenge to ensure that all children and young people receive what they need from our education system. Any reforms must directly focus on improving equity through raising the educational engagement, wellbeing and attainment of cohorts of students who face systemic barriers to educational attainment.

The ACT Government's local education reform agenda is transformative and applicable at the national level. Collaboration with our students, families and expert education workforce delivered the [Future of Education Strategy](#) (the strategy). This co-designed strategy reflects community expectations of an excellent education system that is achieved through equity and achieves this over a 10-year period, 2018-2028.

The strategy focuses on foundations and principles that collaboratively achieve excellence through equity. Four foundations were chosen to achieve a system that delivers growth in learning outcomes for all children and young people including those who experience disadvantage and/or are high achieving:

- place students at the centre of their learning;
- empower teachers, school leaders and other professionals to meet the learning needs of all students;
- build strong communities for learning; and
- strengthen systems to focus on equity with quality.

The ACT Education Directorate has aligned its operations and improvement actions with these foundations, delivering an education system that is led with the following principles:

- **Equity:** Student achievement sets aside economic, social and cultural barriers.
- **Student agency:** Students make decisions about their learning and how their learning environments operate.
- **Access:** Supports for learning and wellbeing are available and provided to all students.
- **Inclusion:** Diversity is embraced, all students are accommodated and a universal sense of belonging fostered.

In Phase 2 of the strategy's implementation (2021 – 2023), the ACT Government has elevated the focus on wellbeing as a priority enabler for engaged learning.

The strategy is an example of locally led education reform, and its focus areas and principles will guide the ACT Government's consideration of future national reform proposals, with a view to ensuring coherence and integrity between our efforts at both the local and national level.

The ACT Government encourages the Expert Panel to propose equity reforms that enhance the existing reform work of jurisdictions.

## **2. Practical Reforms with Local Flexibility**

National education reforms must be consensus-driven, practical and prioritise local flexibility to ensure that jurisdictions, systems, school leaders and their communities can lead implementation in a way that is responsive to their local context. Otherwise, educators are likely to be disempowered and minimally compliant rather than energised and committed to improvement efforts.

There must also be clear benefit arising from national effort. The specific needs, targets and aspirations of our education system in the ACT should not constrain the specific identified needs in other jurisdictions. When aspirations for reform are shared nationally they are most likely to be sustainable.

National reforms should not be so prescriptive as to limit the ability of states, territories, systems and schools to consider innovative approaches to education. In the ACT, systems and schools are working on different approaches to school improvement. Over decades, innovations here and nationally provide all systems with opportunities to learn.

The Expert Panel should consider the viability of proposals in the national education context and ensure its recommendations are supported by all jurisdictions.

### **3. Meaningful targets and efficient accountability**

Oversight of schools and systems must be efficient, allowing more time and effort to uplift support to schools and improve teaching quality. The ACT Government is concerned that education reform conversations focus too heavily on expanding national education targets and accountability measures. The Consultation Paper includes a focus on targets, measurement, reporting, and accountability, which risks drawing systems and educators' effort and attention away from addressing equity challenges. Instead, the focus should be on considering how we can rationalise accountability measures and reporting processes.

The ACT Government takes accountability to the ACT community seriously, reporting three strategic indicators each year. These indicators, Engagement/Belonging, Learning Gain, and Equity, reflect a mature theory of change that aims to improve the entire system and create genuine life opportunities for all students in ACT public schools.

Instead of adding national targets and accountability measures, increased national cohesion in performance targets could be achieved by agreeing a clear theory of change and also a framework or parameters for local targets and public accountability.

Such an approach would allow education systems across Australia to honour their significant variations due to regional disparities, cultural differences, and socio-economic contexts but still contribute to a more cohesive national approach to measuring and reporting on improvement. Every jurisdiction will have their nuance and local emphasis that can be catered for in this type of approach.

In terms of a compelling theory of change, the time is right to consider how student belonging/wellbeing can be an explicit part of the performance narrative. This however does not require a national measure.

Through the School Climate and Satisfaction Survey, the ACT has a long established, evidence-based instrument for monitoring wellbeing that meets the needs of the ACT. Reforms through the NRSA to support mental health and wellbeing of young people must not be distracted by the pursuit of unnecessary national wellbeing measures that would both break local historical time series and allow for unwarranted comparisons between jurisdictions, or school systems.

The ACT Government encourages the Expert Panel to ensure accountability measures associated with reforms are efficient and achieve cohesion while reducing the workload burden associated with targets. The next agreement's emphasis should be on reform over compliance measures.

### **4. Focusing on Mental Health and Wellbeing**

The ACT Government particularly welcomes the focus on mental health and wellbeing in the Consultation Paper. The importance of student wellbeing as a key driver of improved education outcomes cannot be overstated. Student engagement with schooling/sense of belonging is the starting point in the theory of change in the ACT and wellbeing is central to this. While education remains the core function of schools and teachers, it is evident that schools also play an integral role in the broader human service system. There is a growing

need for schools to provide comprehensive support to address the diverse needs of children and their families.

We recognise that while systems like the ACT are improving targeted wellbeing supports, schools cannot respond to all of the needs of students on their own. The Australian Government has a role to play in incentivising collaboration and innovation in wellbeing reform. To achieve national education reforms focused on wellbeing, it is crucial for governments to collaborate and enhance the way schools deliver wrap-around services and community supports to children, without increasing the workload pressure on educators and school leaders.

Over the past decade, the expectations placed on schools to address social challenges and promote family and community resilience have significantly increased. While schools aim to provide holistic support for the whole child and young person, it is essential to manage this in a way that does not burden educators and school leaders with unsustainable workloads. Sustainable workloads and personal wellbeing are vital for retaining educators in the profession.

Various models, such as multi-service schools and community schools, have demonstrated their potential in providing support for equity cohorts. However, the implementation of these models requires careful design. The next agreement should enable the improved delivery of wrap-around and support services within school contexts, focusing on the wellbeing of students while minimising the impact on educators.



## PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR EXPERT PANEL

The ACT Government proposes that the Expert Panel consider addressing the following additional questions in preparation for developing a final report:

1. How can future agreements build more national cohesion and a compelling theory of change to underpin targets while ensuring that reforms provide jurisdictions with the autonomy to deliver change contextually?
2. Can accountability measures and funding transparency be streamlined to ensure that administrative burden is reduced?
3. What additional supports do students need to thrive at school and how can schools best partner with government services and the community to meet these needs?
4. How can jurisdictions and systems collaborate in support of improving numeracy outcomes for all students?