



**Australian
Association for the
Education of the
Gifted and
Talented**

**Submission to the
Chair and Expert Panel**

**Review of the
National School Reform Agreement
2023**

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Summary

The Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented (AAEGT) believes the 2023 Review of the National School Reform Agreement is timely. Teachers do not have the time, resourcing or specific skills needed to help meet the needs of the diverse range of students in their classroom. Schools do not have enough teachers to effectively manage the diversity of learning and social emotional needs of students enrolled in their schools. This requires urgent action from the Australian Government and School Authorities.

The AAEGT suggests that if the following actions were taken, underachievement cases would reduce, schools and school staff would be better equipped to equitably support and nurture all students, including gifted and high ability learners.

Government Actions

- Establish (with the consultation of experts in the field) a Standards for Gifted Education document similar to the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and educational reforms to support teachers and schools in their planning and decision-making processes.
- Include gifted education and gifted learners in key education reviews, documentation, funding models and planning alongside other diversity factors.

Changes needed to schools and teaching practice:

- Preservice teaching training in gifted education and neurodivergence.
- Preservice training in anxiety and trauma to support the wellbeing of students.
- Mandatory federal policy and continuous professional learning in gifted education and gifted learners with disability.
- Identification of the number of gifted students and the number of students who are gifted learners with disability in Australian schools and adjust funding accordingly.
- Schools and classrooms to become much more flexible in both teaching strategies and in the learning environment.
- Time and support for teachers in effective gifted education provision.
- Increasing student voice so they experience value, connection and belonging. Education is being done 'with' them, not 'to' them.

About the AAEGT

The AAEGT is comprised of members from all states and territories in Australia. They include university researchers/academics, educational consultants, schools, principals, teachers and parents. Furthermore, members represent a diverse population incorporating a variety of cultural backgrounds and geographical locations, including metropolitan, regional, rural and remote members.

The purpose for which the AAEGT is established is to advance education by promoting and protecting the educational entitlement and well-being of the gifted and talented. The AAEGT pursues this purpose through a range of activities and services that may include but are not limited to:

- (a) Providing national leadership in Gifted and Talented Education.
- (b) Advocating on behalf of our members for the educational and well-being needs of gifted and talented students.
- (c) Working with politicians and governments towards legislative and policy inclusion of gifted and talented students to achieve their recognition and inclusion in schools and Australian society.
- (d) Promoting research and advancing scholarship in Gifted and Talented Education.
- (e) Collaborating to provide and communicate evidence about gifted and talented students, their intellectual and affective needs, and appropriate educational provisions.
- (f) Recognising outstanding practice and eminence in the scholarship of Gifted and Talented Education.

Introduction

The National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) commenced on 1 July 2019, with the objective that: "...that Australian schooling provides a high quality and equitable education for all students" (COAG 2019). The NSRA is intended to contribute to the achievement of the following outcomes:

- a. Academic achievement improves for all students, including priority equity cohorts

- b. All students are engaged in their schooling
- c. Students gain the skills they need to transition to further study and/or work and life success.

These outcomes identify that **all** students should be engaged in their schooling and demonstrate improvement in academic achievement. However, the **NSRA continually excludes** a cohort of students that comprise of at least 10% of students in our classrooms around Australia. These are our gifted and high ability students. Why is this cohort not given fair and equitable inclusion, despite ongoing evidence that the upper bands in Australia's PISA results continue to drop? Why are we not including gifted and high ability students despite recent research demonstrating that up to 50% of gifted students in Australian schools are underachieving (Jackson & Jung, 2022)? What are we doing to ensure all students, **including gifted students**, are engaged in their schooling?

In this submission, the AAEGT has addressed the Terms of Reference and key ideas through responding to a number of questions outlined in the ***Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System***.

Gifted and high ability students do not engage in schoolwork where a one-size-fits-all curriculum is applied. They need teachers who are trained to nurture and support their unique learning needs. Gifted and high ability students need to be nurtured and receive an education that is based on their readiness-to-learn.

Gifted and high ability children need:

- A challenging education,
- Relationships with “true peers”: peers of similar ability with similar interests,
- Responsive pedagogical practices whereby their teachers can provide an appropriately extended and enriched curriculum,
- Adult empathy, especially from teachers who need to be on the lookout for loneliness, social isolation and disconnect which will lead to school refusal, anxiety and depression.
- Timely access to psychologists and specialist psychologists if the need arises, so that school refusal and any mental health concerns can be dealt with quickly.

Question Responses

1. What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA?

Australian education should be focused on measuring growth. While research identifies that best pedagogical practice includes responsiveness to pre-testing and measured growth in post-testing, very little research points to how well this is being implemented and practiced for gifted learners. It is reasonable to expect that all students should experience one year's growth commiserate with one year's learning.. The latest Productively Commission report (2023) recommended that best practice in education is not bound by one year of instruction to one calendar year. Funding should be more flexible and teaching practice should include untimed syllabuses, whereby lessons reflect students' academic progress rather than their age. This group of students require intentional inclusion and planning.

Furthermore, the next NSRA should be assessing the ability – or potential - of Australian school students. At the present time, the majority of assessment and data collection is focussed on performance or achievement. If we are to realise the full potential of Australian school students, it is imperative that we assess their potential. In recognition of the fact that no assessment instrument is perfect, potential should be assessed in multiple different ways.

Relatedly, we should be assessing the degree of underachievement of Australian school students. Underachievement may be defined as the difference between one's potential and actual performance. It may also be considered to be a measure of the degree to which a student is achieving to their potential. Underachievement may be assessed in a number of different ways (e.g., absolute split method, the nomination method, the regression method etc), providing opportunity to ascertain the root causes as to why a child is underachieving. Rimm (2003) describes underachievement in gifted students as a 'national pandemic'. Given that recent research identified up to 50% of gifted students in Australia school are underachieving (Jackson & Jung, 2022), it is imperative that action be taken to address this alarming figure.

2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems and

sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those at risk of falling behind?

All students are at risk of falling behind their ability level if their learning needs are not met. Our nation needs to focus on the underachievement of Australian school students and adopt strategies that address the underachievement of Australian school students. One key strategy that aligns with one of the key recommendations of the Productivity Commission is a need for lessons to be based on student progress rather than age. That is, the use of untimed syllabi to address the needs of lower achieving students, and to extend the capacity of higher achieving students. Many students are underachieving due to a curriculum that is inappropriately pitched (i.e., too fast or too slow). This is despite a national curriculum that was originally designed to move away from a lock-step trajectory.

Effective grouping of gifted and high ability students enables teachers to deliver appropriate differentiation in product, process and content. Depth and complexity through extension of the curriculum and engagement with curriculum elaborations are evidence-based practices that nurture students' learning progression.

A key target should involve an identification process similar to that actioned in other countries such as England. Screeners are undertaken at/before Year Two and Year Six for every student. This screening methodology captures every students, regardless of diversity factors. As students at risk come from all backgrounds, we need to be undertaking assessments of, and addressing the possible underachievement of all students. It is inappropriate to be only targeting specific sub-groups of students while other sub-groups such as gifted and high ability students are left out.

3. How can all students at risk of falling behind be identified early on to enable swift learning interventions?

To make data-informed decisions, we need to be undertaking early assessment of both potential and achievement of all students. Particularly for gifted students and those already naturally high achieving, current methods often fall short. Early screeners are fraught with ceilings, so that a young child's ability is often not

realised until it is far too late, and they have disengaged from the classroom. Early, appropriate and ceiling-free screeners will allow schools and teachers to identify students who demonstrate underachievement (i.e., the difference between potential and achievement) as they commence their progression through the early years of schooling.

Early identification of underachievement is imperative, as underachievement in the early years of schooling is likely to be less substantial and more reversible than underachievement in the later years of schooling.

4. Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts?

The target group of concern should be ALL underachieving students. These exist in all sub-groups of the Australian student population and are not bound by demographic, culture, disability etc.

Designating certain equity groups for greater focus and attention risks neglecting underachieving students in the non-selected equity categories. Furthermore, excluding a diversity group such a gifted and high ability does not inform a better and fairer education system. On the contrary, it ignores and fails to equitably acknowledge that giftedness is present in all facets of society. Empirical research identifies that gifted and high ability students are not guaranteed success with appropriate access to a supportive and nurturing environment.

5. What should the specific targets in the next NSRA be?

Specific targets should include:

1. The assessment of the ability/potential and the underachievement of all Australian students.

2. The setting of targets relating to the reduction of the level of underachievement of all Australian students, once the precise level of underachievement is ascertained from Target 1.

3. Inclusion of gifted and high ability students when and wherever other diversity groups are referenced.

4. An explicit plan for providing time, support and resourcing for teachers in effective gifted education provision.

There is no reason why these targets should be different for different levels of schooling. To achieve this, we need to move beyond assessing student achievement.

6. How can the targets in the next NSRA be structured to ensure evidence-based approaches underpin a nationally coherent reform agenda while allowing jurisdictions and schools the flexibility to respond to individual student circumstances and needs?

By ensuring a solid cross-section of expertise in diversity is included in planning and innovating evidence-based approaches, jurisdictions and schools will be provided with the direction, guidance and tools required. Flexibility and adaptability is necessary due to the diversity of the Australian landscape

Furthermore, a focus on underachievement is an evidence-based approach that may simultaneously underpin a national reform agenda, but by its very nature, also responds to individual student circumstances and needs.

7. How should progress towards any new targets in the next NSRA be reported on?

An annual or a biannual report of progress of outcomes will provide transparency to Australians. Informed reporting should include information gathering from all stakeholders, including students and parents, to determine progress towards achieving any new targets.

8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively?

A positive atmosphere and culture at school is achieved when all students feel understood, valued and included. For giftedness in all its forms, this means that they are equally and fairly celebrated, included in activities and their educational needs are acknowledged and planned for. They have opportunities to learn about and understand their 'difference' without the sense that their giftedness defines them and demands that they always achieve highly in every domain.

For a positive culture to be achieved, there is a need for:

1. Regular assessment of student wellbeing
2. Staff training on student wellbeing
3. Recruitment of staff with expertise in wellbeing (e.g., psychologists, counsellors)
4. Support for staff wellbeing

10. Should a wellbeing target be included in the next NSRA?

Well-being targets for all students should be included in the next NSRA. Additional data is required if these wellbeing targets are to appropriately data informed. This data may come from a student survey on wellbeing (which should be pilot tested for validity and reliability, and relevant to the Australian context). Such a survey should include assessments of the sense of belonging, happiness, safety, and support of students, in addition to assessments that are traditionally undertaken in the field of mental health.

12. To what extent do school leaders and teachers have the skills and training to support students struggling with mental health?

Generally speaking, school leaders and teachers have minimal skills and training to support students struggling with mental health. As such, there is a need for current teachers to gain access to professional development in supporting the mental health of students, and for pre-service teachers to receive training on supporting the mental health of students in their university programs. Priority in mental health first aid should be elevated to level of standard physical first aid courses.

13. What can be done to establish stronger partnerships between schools, Local Health Networks and Primary Health Networks?

Health professionals may be given formal part-time appointments at individual schools or groups of schools. Specifically-appointed school personal would play an integral part in strengthening partnerships between the school and health networks.

15. What change(s) would attract more students into the teaching profession?

1. Incentives not offered by other professions (e.g, flexible working arrangements, regular sabbaticals, foreign exchange programs, plentiful scholarships)
2. Better marketing of the profession as one that is valuable, satisfying, and worthwhile. The targeted market group should include high-achieving high school graduates and field professional
3. Greater remuneration
4. Higher status as a profession

16. What change(s) would support teachers to remain in the profession?

1. Targeted professional learning, Community of Practices, instructional Coaching and overall support
2. Appropriate resourcing
3. Incentives not offered by other professions (e..g, flexible working arrangements, regular sabbaticals, foreign exchange programs, plentiful scholarships)
4. Better marketing of the profession as one that is valuable, satisfying, and worthwhile. The targeted market group should include high-achieving high school graduates and field professional.
5. Greater remuneration
6. Higher status as a profession

17. What change(s) would support qualified teachers to return to the profession?

1. Targeted professional learning, Community of Practices, instructional Coaching and overall support
2. Appropriate resourcing

3. Incentives not offered by other professions (e.g, flexible working arrangements, regular sabbaticals, foreign exchange programs, plentiful scholarships)

4. Better marketing of the profession as one that is valuable, satisfying, and worthwhile. The targeted market group should include high-achieving high school graduates and field professional.

5. Greater remuneration

6. Higher status as a profession

19. What can be done to attract a diverse group of people into the teaching profession to ensure it looks like the broader community?

1. The promotion of teachers from diverse backgrounds into leadership positions

2. The targeting of teachers from diverse backgrounds in recruitment programs

3. Mentorship programs with mentors from diverse backgrounds

20. What can be done to attract more First Nations teachers?

1. The promotion of teachers from First Nations backgrounds into leadership positions

2. The targeting of teachers from First Nations backgrounds in recruitment programs

3. Mentorship programs with mentors from First Nations backgrounds

Additional comments

Affective needs and educational psychology fundamentals of gifted learners

The affective component generally refers to the emotional and social aspects of gifted students' experiences and development. Gifted students can have social and emotional needs, such as heightened sensitivity, perfectionism, asynchronous development, and a need for intellectual peers. Addressing the affective component involves supporting their social and emotional wellbeing, promoting positive self-concept, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing appropriate challenges and

opportunities for growth. Often, effectively nurturing academic ability contributes to the students' sense of engagement and belonging.

Gifted Learners with Disability

It is also important to consider gifted learners with disability (also referred to as “twice exceptional” in the research literature) where there is very little understanding of their learning and wellbeing needs, despite disability legislation and inclusive education agendas. Gifted students on the autistic spectrum, students with demand avoidance, physical disabilities, students with ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia etc fall into this subset of the gifted. Furthermore, within these groups there are co-morbidities and further subsets. Empirically collected data shows that many schools cannot identify their gifted students, let alone their gifted students with disability or twice exceptional students.

The one common co-morbidity with all these groups is anxiety. Each attack of anxiety causes trauma, thereby creating long term mental health problems in a country where mental health can never be adequately funded. High/extreme anxiety and trauma are preventing these children from flourishing in Australian classrooms. For many, even to put on a school uniform is traumatic, as the fabrics, styles and designs cause physical discomfort, and even pain. These students feel their differences acutely and are vulnerable to bullying and peer exclusion. If Australia is to thrive economically, many issues need to be addressed. As equity cohort, gifted students, including gifted students with disability, must be included in the National School Reform Agreement.

Effective differentiation and flexible, emotionally safe learning environments are not always provided in our schools for gifted neurodivergent learners who have higher levels of anxiety compared to same age cohorts, although the risk factors for these co-morbidities remains unclear. This is in part, due to lack of training and a lack of provision of strategies and services, for educators in this area.

Consequently, there has been a rise in home schooling and school refusal within this population, particularly since school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the school lockdowns, these students discovered there are other ways to learn, other than ‘school’. In their new learning environments, they thrived. They are

still thriving. They have control, they have 'voice', they have choice and most importantly they have physical, emotional and intellectual safety. Most are engaged in learning once more.

Solutions include differentiation and acknowledgment that 'one size does not fit all'. Advocates on behalf of gifted learners with disability (GLD) commonly state 'if you have met one GLD student, you have met one'. The industrial-age model of inflexible rules, authority figures, lock step age progression, coercion, mandatory syllabi and conservatism is no longer working.

Evidence of Cost to the Students – School refusal

School refusal often starts with an unfulfilling school curriculum that is not adequately or appropriately addressed. A gifted child can find that the questions they ask their schoolteacher go unanswered. Furthermore, the absence of like-minded friends in their class means they are unable to establish important social connections. It is understandable why things start to fall apart when a child becomes disconnected and disengaged.

Whilst no specific studies on the cost of school refusal in gifted students are presently available in the research literature, inference can be made about the long-term cost of school refusal by examining some studies in underachievement.

Peterson and Colangelo (1996) looked at the school records of 153 gifted students through high school and college. They found high school and college achievement were strongly related in the achievers and underachievers. Of the achievers attended 4-year college, 83% graduated. However, data concerning underachievers established that of the 87% attended college, only 52% graduated.

Graduation, or simply enrolment in university, seems almost impossible and most certainly unattainable for school refusers. As a nation, Australia may suffer from a lack of future productivity, entrepreneurship and research if we continue to fail our best and brightest.

Recommendations

The issues discussed will need a multi-faceted approach and the inclusion of expertise on all diversity fields, including gifted and talented.

The AAEGT suggests that if the following actions were taken, underachievement cases would reduce, schools and school staff would be better equipped to equitably support and nurture all students, including gifted and high ability learners.

Government Actions

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