

Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

AITSL Response to Consultation Paper

August 2023



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Summary

Education reform requires a commitment to shift student outcomes so that all children and young people progress and achieve success. We already have some great practice and outcomes occurring within our education system, and a highly-committed profession of teachers and school leaders.

Further improvement requires an investment of teacher and school leader time in the practices that have the greatest impact on student outcomes. This also means reducing the clutter and distractions that impede a teacher from concentrating fully on their primary role – teaching.

Real and significant change can be made by focusing efforts on reorganising and supporting how we share and use expertise, within and across classrooms and schools – always with the goal of improving student progress and achievement.

Since our final submission to the Productivity Commission’s Review of the National School Reform Agreement in October 2022, the initiatives suggested by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) have progressed in various ways. AITSL has been commissioned to undertake some of this work directly, and activity across the wider Australian education landscape is progressing other initiatives.

The negotiation of a new National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) comes at an opportune time. In the school sector, the NSRA can build on agreements already made through the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. There is also an opportunity to increase coherence across education sectors, by aligning the NSRA with the outcomes of the Productivity Commission’s inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector, and the Australian Universities Accord process. Greater coordination between – and smoother transitions between – the early childhood, school, and tertiary education sectors can deliver great benefits in a future that is likely to be characterised by rapid change and even greater need for lifelong learning.

AITSL recognises the importance of the NSRA in seeing that work that has been initiated reaches its full potential, and that subsequent initiatives coherently work towards consistent goals.

Introduction

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITSL) is pleased to respond to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* consultation paper.

As a Commonwealth company responsible for developing national frameworks in a policy area where state and territory governments hold responsibility, AITSL is uniquely placed to comment on the review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

AITSL's work spans three main areas of focus:

- **Initial teacher education:** We provide support, resources and tools to help ensure that every pre-service teacher is classroom ready upon graduation.
- **Quality teaching:** We help teachers be the best they can be and provide tools and resources to maximise their impact on student learning.
- **Leadership:** We help school leaders become highly effective by giving them the tools, resources, policies and practices needed to succeed in their important role.

Teaching and school leadership are the two primary in-school factors that influence student outcomes, and a focus on the quality of teaching and school leadership in the next NSRA would reflect this. Ensuring that high-quality teaching occurs in every classroom is the key to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to live up to their potential.

All Australian governments have agreed to the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. This plan recognises the importance of teaching and focuses on areas where national collaboration will be beneficial. The NSRA is an opportunity to lock in a long-term commitment to initiatives that will have a real impact on the supply of teachers and the quality of teaching in Australian classrooms.

To achieve this, AITSL's response to the Consultation Paper focuses on three key areas to further develop and embed high-quality teaching and leadership within Australian schools. They are:

- Updated Professional Standards
- Career Pathways for Expert Teachers
- A Long-term Commitment to the Teacher Workforce.

An Effective National School Reform Agreement

The NSRA is most likely to make a difference if it is tightly focused on areas where evidence shows that action can make a difference, where there is a clear case for a coordinated national approach, and where all governments and education sectors have a genuine commitment to work together.

National Policy Initiatives should be specific enough that it is clear what governments have committed to and how it will be delivered and reported on. This also requires careful attention to governance and stakeholder engagement, so that decisions on implementation have legitimacy, and projects are neither stalled nor diluted in their scope. Although there are many issues that could be addressed, a small number of high-impact initiatives are most likely to sustain focus over the life of the next NSRA.

For these reasons, this response to the Consultation Paper focuses on proposing National Policy Initiatives that the AITSL Board of Directors believes will have a real impact. These would give effect to the commitment of all Australian governments and education sectors to improving excellence and equity in Australia's education system.

In addition, effective reform requires a commitment to evaluation. The NSRA should include mechanisms to evaluate implementation of the National Policy Initiatives and to collect and publish data that can be used to drive equity and excellence in Australia's schools. For initiatives aimed at the teacher workforce, the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) initiative has created a valuable national data asset, and continued investment in this initiative would provide valuable information to drive policy development, workforce planning, and evaluation of initiatives.

Updated Professional Standards

AITSL reaffirms its recommendation that publication and implementation of a comprehensive and cohesive suite of professional standards encompassing the full spectrum of teaching and school leadership contexts should be a National Policy Initiative in the next NSRA.

The current professional standards, and elaborations to these, have been developed as discrete entities over the last 13 years, to promote excellence in teaching and school leadership. Similarly, multiple guidelines have been commissioned to better support governments and non-government school sectors across Australia in developing a workforce capable of delivering high-quality teaching and school leadership. Reflecting the changing demands educators are faced with, several of these guidelines are currently being revised.

AITSL believes that the passage of time since the current professional standards for teachers and principals were approved makes a thorough review timely. Given that Education Ministers would need to endorse any changes, Education Ministers should commission such a review to give it the appropriate authority. The NSRA is one opportunity for this clear commissioning to take place.

AITSL recommends that this National Policy Initiative includes:

- All governments and education sectors committing to an updated, integrated suite of Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders (including middle leaders), and to implementing the revised Standards once they are agreed by Ministers.
- All education sectors committing to use the revised Standards as the basis for increased efforts in school leader preparation, induction development, professional learning and career progression, outlined in bilateral agreements.

A thorough review of the suite of professional standards would take into account developments since they were originally approved by Ministers. Issues that have arisen in recent consultations include:

- Applicability to early childhood teachers and settings
- Inclusion of students with a disability, including the need to take into account findings from the current *Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability* (Disability Royal Commission)
- An increased focus on student wellbeing
- Updated evidence on effective teaching and leadership practices
- The role of teachers, especially at the higher career stages, in mentoring pre-service and early career teachers.

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Teacher Standards), developed in 2010, consist of 7 Standards with 37 focus areas and descriptors embedded within these. Feedback from stakeholders has suggested that the descriptors may have varying importance, and that this may differ between career stages.

AITSL will undertake work to establish whether there is a consistent view amongst stakeholders as to the relative importance of the 37 descriptors within each career stage. Expanding this work would enable an update of the Teacher Standards to include a focus on priority equity groups, as well as promote their applicability and usability by integrating subsequent elaborations (e.g. early childhood and mathematics).

Since the Teacher Standards were approved, there have been many developments that would need to be taken into account in a review, including an increased number of teachers working in early childhood settings, increased focus on student wellbeing, potential recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission, and advances in educational technology, including the emergence of artificial intelligence. An update could also take into account new research into effective teaching practices, for example the core content for initial teacher education programs identified by the Teacher Education Expert Panel.

Finally, a review would align the Teacher Standards with the professional standards for school leaders, providing greater clarity in career pathways and professional learning needs across a teaching career.

Professional Standards for Middle Leaders

The more recent work AITSL has undertaken in conjunction with the Queensland Department of Education, and with the endorsement of Education Ministers, to develop Professional Standards for Middle Leaders (Middle Leader Standards) should also be expanded and refined.

The Middle Leader Standards should be adopted nationally and integrated with the revised professional standards for teachers and school leaders, providing a robust framework for educators as they progress through their careers. The Middle Leader Standards are currently being validated, and by mid-2024 will represent an up-to-date set of standards based on wide consultation with the profession.

The current draft of the Middle Leader Standards, which has been used for validation with the profession, outlines the enabling dispositions, knowledge and skills middle leaders need to succeed in their roles. The current draft then outlines four other standards:

- Enhancing understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People
- Coordinating high-impact teaching and learning
- Leading improvement in teaching and learning
- Managing effectively.

Clearly articulating the roles of middle leaders should also assist in defining the role of classroom teachers, and may reduce workload by having each role focus on the things that are most efficiently done at that level.

Australian Professional Standard for Principals

To complement this work, the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (Principal Standard) should be reviewed and revised to determine well-defined levels of expertise so it can be better used to drive improvements in leadership. Current uses in recruitment, performance and development processes should also be strengthened.

As with teachers, effective gradation of the Principal Standard and assessment against these levels will allow school leaders to demonstrate and increase their expertise and impact.

Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures

The *Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures* (Accreditation Standards and Procedures) were agreed by Education Ministers in 2011 and have been amended several times since. Implementing the recommendations of the Teacher Education Expert Panel, currently being considered by Ministers, would require further amendments.

It would be timely to revise the Accreditation Standards and Procedures as a whole, rather than continuing to make piecemeal amendments. This would allow a new approach to reflect recent developments in initial teacher education, like the rise in employment-based pathways. It would also streamline the process by removing elements that are not critical to delivering an effective initial teacher education program.

Proposed National Policy Initiative

Education Ministers should commission a review of the professional standards framework for teaching and school leadership including professional standards for teachers and leaders, and standards and procedures for accreditation of initial teacher education programs.

The review should consult widely with the teaching profession, initial teacher education providers, teacher employers, unions and other stakeholders. The review should aim to develop a coherent and contemporary set of standards for teachers, school leaders at all levels, and initial teacher education programs.

All education systems and sectors should commit to implementing the revised standards, once Ministers approve them, to promote better regulation of the profession whilst further supporting the development of teachers and school leaders.

Career Pathways for Expert Teachers

AITSL recommends including a National Policy Initiative focused on recognising and leveraging the expertise of Australia's top teachers in the next NSRA. Under the NTWAP, Education Ministers have committed to dramatically expanding the number of certified Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers (HALTs) or equivalent to 10,000 by 2025.

The NSRA creates an opportunity to make best use of this greatly expanded cohort of excellent teachers. The development of specific roles for expert teachers is essential to make best use of their skills and maximise their impact on student outcomes. These roles should include mentoring pre-service and early career teachers.

A focus on attractive roles could also improve career pathways and retention rates of these highly skilled, knowledgeable teachers, as well as incentivise more teachers to develop their teaching practice and aspire towards achievements such as HALT certification.

Revitalising the HALT certification process

AITSL is leading work to streamline HALT certification and remove barriers in the application process. Following an extensive consultation and development period, a new *Framework for the Certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers* (the Framework) was approved for implementation at the Education Ministers Meeting on 6 July 2023 and is now the national governing document for HALT certification.

The Framework outlines the essential elements of HALT certification and simplifies the mandatory requirements by granting jurisdictional certifying authorities the flexibility to develop their own, streamlined certification processes. The Framework includes strong quality assurance processes so that all stakeholders can be confident that assessments are being made to the same standard under different certification processes across Australia.

To accompany the Framework, other commitments are needed to reach the 10,000 HALTs (or equivalent) target articulated in the NTWAP and to ensure the sustainability and attraction of HALT certification for expert teachers who choose to pursue pedagogical leadership.

Career pathways and effective deployment of expert teachers

AITSL strongly supports the initiatives outlined in NTWAP Action 17, including the ambitious national target for 10,000 HALTs (or equivalent). Beyond this, a national strategy is required to:

- ensure these expert teachers are effectively deployed and utilised in education systems to maximise their impact
- retain these highly skilled individuals within the teaching profession in roles that focus on pedagogical leadership.

AITSL's direct engagement with HALTs has revealed frequent frustration that certification as a Highly Accomplished or Lead teacher does not necessarily lead to expanded roles. This likely contributes to reduced job satisfaction and teachers leaving the profession.

AITSL recommends creating specialised roles for expert teachers, akin to the teaching tracks in Singapore, with HALTs playing a central role in supporting and coaching other teachers. The Grattan Institute report, *Top teachers: sharing expertise to improve teaching*, advocates for the introduction of two esteemed, well-paid roles designed to support other teachers:

- **Master Teacher (1% of teachers)** – pedagogical leaders working across a network of schools, coordinating training and teacher development.
- **Instructional Specialist (5-8% of teachers)** – instructional leaders supporting and guiding teachers within their school, alongside their own classroom teaching load.

HALT certification or an equivalent process should be a prerequisite for these or similar roles as it will ensure quality and rigour in the selection process, and provide additional opportunities and incentives for certified teachers.

Innovative deployment models could help systems or other groups of cooperating schools to better harness the expertise of these teachers to address areas of need. For example, Lead teachers could be deployed on a voluntary basis to a different school/region for a 12-month period to implement a specific intervention or undertake teacher professional learning within an area of need. They would then return to their substantive position after that 12-month period. Such deployments may require additional funding or benefits (for example, if based in a remote area) to attract highly skilled staff.

A clear career pathway for teachers that allows for continual progression and rewards teaching expertise should bolster teacher retention and present teaching as a more attractive career option for ambitious high school graduates and mid-career changers.

Proposed National Policy Initiative

Under the NSRA, all education systems and sectors should commit to:

- revitalising and actively streamlining their certification processes under the new *Framework for the Certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers*
- establishing career pathways for HALTs by providing multiple role types that leverage their expertise
- implementing innovative and effective deployment models to maximise utilisation and impact of expert teachers.

A Long-term Commitment to the Teacher Workforce

In December 2022, Education Ministers agreed to the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (NTWAP). This plan represents a comprehensive approach to supporting teachers and increasing teacher supply. In the NTWAP, Ministers state that *'It is our intention that the Action Plan be a living document, one that we continue to evolve and adapt'*. The NSRA is an opportunity to lock in a commitment to the next stage of action in the focus areas identified by the NTWAP.

Supporting quality teaching through initial teacher education

The report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel, currently under consideration by Ministers, provides a foundation for further improvement to initial teacher education (ITE) in Australia. The NSRA is an opportunity to commit to a medium-term agenda to generate this improvement. Ministers have already agreed to the inclusion of core content in ITE programs, and are due to consider other recommendations of the Expert Panel shortly.

AITSL recommends that the next NSRA ensures that:

- Viable and flexible alternative pathways (such as internship-style programs) are promoted to encourage participation in ITE. This includes support that attracts and assists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enter the teaching profession. Others employed in education roles such as teaching assistants and tutors may also be candidates for these approaches. Teacher employers and ITE providers should explore creating additional pathways into teaching, including the development of a national framework and guidance, which employers can tailor to their own needs.
- A commitment to establish the ITE Quality Assurance Board recommended by the Expert Panel is delivered. This Board would increase confidence in the quality of ITE programs, and that this was consistent across Australia. Under the NSRA, governments should commit that teacher regulatory authorities will act on findings from the Quality Assurance Board.

Supporting quality teaching in the classroom

Australian teachers and school leaders have immense expertise and make a difference to the lives of children and young people every day. As acknowledged in the Consultation Paper, quality teaching is the greatest in-school influence on student outcomes. It is important that teachers and school leaders are enabled by systems and sectors to spend their time on the activities that have the greatest impact on student growth and achievement. Possible priorities for extensions of the current NTWAP include:

- Progressing a clearer definition and focus on the core roles and responsibilities of a teacher, limiting the additional demands now placed on teachers and enabling them to focus on their most important role – teaching. This would be accompanied by guidance on the roles other staff can play in schools, whether through support to the learning process, or by reducing the administrative burden on teachers (*Refer to NTWAP Action 21*).
- A commitment to improving induction processes in schools, in line with the guidelines for induction of teachers and school leaders which Ministers are due to consider in late 2023 (*Refer to NTWAP Action 14*).
- Establishing national guidance around the deployment of wellbeing staff in schools to provide clarity as to the roles and interactions of these staff, teachers and middle leaders. AITSL also recommends establishing an evidence base as to the impact of such initiatives on both student and teacher outcomes (such as the reduction in teacher workload, disruptive behaviour, or exclusions; improvements in student engagement and the wellbeing of staff and

students alike). Under the NTWAP, the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) initiative is now collecting teacher wellbeing data, which provides a starting point for further investigation (*Refer to NTWAP Actions 21 and 27*).

- Creating evidence-informed guidance for schools and systems regarding the use of personalised learning platforms, including the role of artificial intelligence (AI), for improving student learning and minimising the time teachers spend tailoring the curriculum to meet the needs of specific students. Allied to this, guidance and resources should be provided for teachers to enable them to use these technologies efficiently. This work can build on the draft *National AI In Schools Framework* which is currently the subject of consultation.
- Providing support materials for teachers, mapped to the Australian Curriculum and including evidence-based teaching strategies to promote better teaching. For example, the ‘multi-tiered system of supports’ (MTSS) approach was recommended by the Teacher Education Expert Panel to be included within the core content ITE providers must deliver within teacher education programs and would be a candidate to be included where appropriate. There are many quality materials that have been developed across Australia, and these should form the basis for a national collection. Materials could then be commissioned to fill any gaps. All education systems and sectors should commit to supporting schools to roll out effective teaching practices (*Refer to NTWAP Action 19*).
- Continued commitment to understanding teacher supply and demand. Under the NTWAP, AITSL is developing national projections of teacher supply and demand, based on data in the ATWD. This information will remain valuable into the future, and the NSRA should commit to long-term funding for the ATWD, including supply and demand projections (*Refer to NTWAP Actions 25 and 26*).

Proposed National Policy Initiative

The NSRA should include a clear commitment to implementing an updated version of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. This updated Action Plan should be developed through wide consultation and consider the experience of implementing the first version of the NTWAP.

Possible initiatives to be incorporated in the updated Action Plan include:

- A clear definition of roles and responsibilities in schools, focused on the role of the teacher
- A commitment to improve induction processes in schools
- Guidance on the deployment of wellbeing staff in schools, including partnerships with external agencies
- Developing additional pathways into teaching
- Developing high-quality, evidence-based support materials for teachers
- An ongoing commitment to the ATWD initiative, including the recent expansion to include teacher supply and demand projections.

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