

## APPA Submission to the Better and Fairer Education System Consultation

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### Expert Committee Brief

On March 29, 2023 Minister Clare announced the appointment of an expert panel to advise Education Ministers on the key targets and specific reforms that should be tied to funding in the next National School Reform Agreement.

The panel has been asked to address:

1. **What targets and reforms should be included in the next agreement** to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a particular focus on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - **for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English**
2. How the next agreement can contribute to improving **student mental health and wellbeing**, by addressing in-school factors while acknowledging the impact of non-school factors on wellbeing
3. How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers
4. How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes
5. How to ensure public funding is delivering on national agreements and that all school authorities are **transparent and accountable** to the community for how funding is invested and measuring the impacts of this investment.

In providing this advice, the Review will take into consideration the recommendations and findings of the Productivity Commission's Review into the National School Reform Agreement 2023, the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and existing Government commitments under the other national agreements, including Closing the Gap where appropriate.

The expert panel is to deliver its report to Education Ministers by 31 October 2023.

## APPA Response

### Concerns with the current approach

The Productivity Commission *Report on Government Services 2023: Child care, education and training*<sup>1</sup> was critical of the current Agreement and APPA members feel the current NSRA fails to consider the needs of schools or understand how schools work. While current government policy settings are well intended, a narrow results-based accountability, has manifested in too many priorities, each with their own accountability metrics. In the draft NSRA, we believe there are too many ‘initiatives,’ pilot studies, guidelines, and implementation strategies. We understand the difficulties of effectively working with 24 jurisdictions across the country (government, catholic and independent in each of the eight states and territories) and hence why this situation eventuates. However, these create complexity to educator work and must be addressed.

In their interim report<sup>2</sup> the Productivity Commissioners noted that “despite the large increase in public funding since 2018, student outcomes have stagnated.” Yet the interim report suggests a continued approach of much the same – prioritising a set of projects that we believe are unlikely to make the difference in student outcomes that is being sought. The gulf between policy and the work in classrooms (across a range of contexts) remains wide. Under the policy settings adopted for the last 20 years, education has stagnated or gone backwards. Yet the blame is continually apportioned to schools rather than interrogating the policy settings under which schools are operating. The evidence tells us that policy settings such as those established in the current NSRA are ineffective and do not achieve the desired outcomes. APPA advocates **a different approach to education reform**, an approach that assists us in realising the goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration.

### A different approach to education reform

We want the NSRA to focus on a limited number of **key reform areas**, each of which **impacts on multiple targets**. These reform priorities can be quite specific – but each should have the capacity for school leadership teams to make decisions reflecting their local school context. This set of integrated reforms must be manageable for schools and systems and result in substantial improvements to multiple targets. This set of reforms must align and support the goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration.

**“Our vision is for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face.”<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> *Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Report on Government Services 2023.*

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission 2022, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*, Interim Report, Canberra, September.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>



Reforms need also to support learners to navigate global sustainability challenges and a future where they will be required to think and live differently. School reform has traditionally been based on a production model - an outcome or target is established and a reform is developed to address that target. We must start seeing education as a complex (or ecological) system and less as a production (linear) system. In a complex system, cause and effect are not tightly related and any action is likely to impact on multiple outcomes.

The challenge for schools is that every NSRA and national education policy, is fixated on cause-effect, despite the evidence that this doesn't accurately depict school systems. Even in the draft NSRA and the consultation paper, this disconnected 'bits' approach to policy, is prevalent<sup>4</sup>.

To illustrate this, some examples:

**Example one: Learning to Read**

Reading must be taught well in every classroom. And development of teaching skills in this area must continue to be a priority. Totally accepted.

But in their focus on improving reading, policy makers continue to make the mistake of focussing on the specifics without recognising the MANY factors which impact on children's learning. For example, if a child is fearful, neglected or abused, a great learning environment is insufficient. If a child's health needs are not addressed, if a child is hungry or anxious, if they can't see properly, all of these things impact on their ability to learn. A university ophthalmology program to assess the vision<sup>5</sup> of Year 3 students in low SES schools, found 25% had previously undiagnosed vision errors requiring follow-up. If you have difficulty seeing, it can be difficult to learn to read or access your curriculum entitlement.

We appreciate research that focuses attention on the specifics of learning to read - "We know what it takes to teach children how to read well, but there is still a huge gap between what the research says and what actually happens in our classrooms."<sup>6</sup> We agree - but this is not the whole picture. If for example, five to six children in some classrooms have undiagnosed vision impairments and this is addressed, those children can learn better, which is a potentially enormous improvement in the rate of engagement with learning! If breakfast programs are in place and children can commence class without being hungry – also an improvement. If parents feel connected to the school and are involved in sports teams and community events, the support for children's learning is enhanced. If children and their parents are encouraged to engage in early years programs prior to starting school, wonderful! If community health professionals are a part of those programs and assist with health screening (and they pick up on those vision deficiencies before Year 3) - better and better! All of these things combine to create an environment which is conducive to learning to read. And all of these things should be part of the focus of the next NSRA if we are serious about *school reform*.

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<sup>4</sup> Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. Consultation Paper. <https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/consultations/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system-consultation>

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication Angela Falkenberg, President of APPA

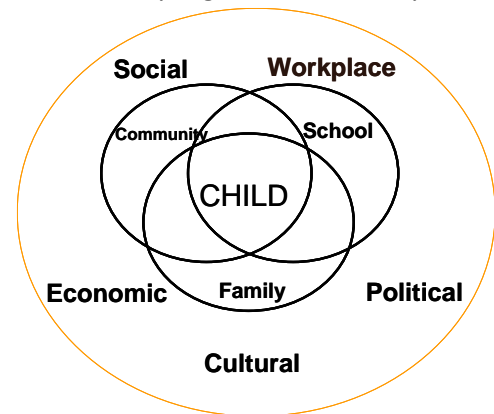
<sup>6</sup> Hunter, J. & Stobart, A. <https://grattan.edu.au/news/how-to-boost-reading-skills/>



### Example two: A Child's World

Children and their worlds are a part of many interconnected systems. In responding to children's needs, these multiple worlds – home, local community, schools – must be taken into account, a concept illustrated by Fiona Stanley<sup>7</sup> in the accompanying diagram. A child's world intersects with all of these.

Too often, children and their education is viewed in isolation. A child's world doesn't consist of separate entities such as siloed government agencies, social welfare systems, voluntary organisations, family and friends. To be successful in creating supportive communities we need a generous, connected community, with local government, other agencies and NGOs focussed on providing interconnected, seamless services to children and their families - for example, by integration of government and NGO services within community service hubs. This provides for coherent service provision, tailored to the needs of families. Currently, service provision is siloed, duplicative or absent, and hard to access in a coherent form. The policy goal needs to be collective community responsibility for the care and education of our children.



APPA advocates for a considerably more integrated, 'ecological' approach to improving education. Our members who spend every day in schools, think the following areas should be the **key reform** focuses for the next NSRA.

### The Key Reform Priorities we recommend

APPA recommends the next NSRA be closely aligned with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, including the focus on early years programs and curriculum.

"This begins with making sure that every young child has the opportunity to benefit from structured play-based learning before they start school, because this helps build the social, emotional and cognitive skills they need to succeed in the years to come."<sup>8</sup>

In addition, we encourage the goal of working "in partnership with young Australians, their families and the broader community to achieve the educational goals for young Australians."<sup>9</sup>

### Key Reform Areas

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley, F. (2006). Positive Futures Conference: Achieving Wellbeing for Children & Families Association of Children's Welfare Agencies Conference. Sydney, 15 August 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

<sup>9</sup> Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration> pp. 6



- 1. Coordinated support for children (wrap around supports/interagency coordination), provision of allied health and social services.** There are many aspects to children’s learning and wellbeing. Combining resources across agencies in supporting people in local areas (place-based) is key. Children need access to allied health supports and screening services, both prior to school and in school. The earlier screening and supports can be provided, the better. Place-based services are premised on the view that families in need are more easily identified locally than on a larger area scale. The more locally we can place services staff, the more quickly we can provide early intervention and proactive service supports. We also believed that place-based services can build and maintain positive relationships, an important consideration for vulnerable families who may have low trust of service personnel. Schools are a relationship-based service and positively connect with families as a result. Combining resources across agencies in supporting people in local areas is a significant strategy we should explicitly pursue. And many of the ‘patches’ of high disadvantage are already well known.<sup>10</sup>
- 2. A focus on learning and development of a primary curriculum.** We need to focus on student learning and develop a specific primary curriculum put together by primary and early childhood experts, that focuses on the basics and leaves room for play, joy and engagement. APPA advocates for a primary curriculum which allows the space for literacy and numeracy together with activities which connect kids and make them a part of the community and the community part of schools. We need a purpose built, primary curriculum, developed by primary and early childhood experts and one that builds the capabilities to live and think differently.
- 3. Measuring Outcomes and Accountability.** We suggest a matrix of indicators which measure student progress. These measures should be able to be disaggregated to provide data on groups of students identified at risk of falling behind. In addition to a range of measures of progress in literacy and numeracy, this matrix of measures should include measures of belonging, student engagement, fitness, access to health services and screening, community engagement and all of the rich indicators of a flourishing education system.

All-in national testing such as NAPLAN is problematic. The current NAPLAN testing process is skewing the school experience in detrimental ways. Multiple measures of progress in literacy and numeracy for each student should be a continuous process – not a biennial event. If Ministers want to persist with NAPLAN, then make it sample-based testing and use it to assess the performance of jurisdictions. We recommend it be replaced with in school measures of progress.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Tanton et al, (2021). *Dropping Off The Edge* report. Accessed from: <https://www.dote.org.au>



4. **Resourcing for primary education and prior to school programs.** Primary schools are funded significantly less per student than their secondary equivalents. Yet primary outcomes substantially predict the course of a student's life. Prior performance in primary school, predicts future outcomes, more so than student background or parental education or occupation<sup>11</sup>. APPA calls for funding to ensure an education of the highest quality for every student, in every locale and for funding to be targeted to those students who need it most.

More resources must be devolved to the school level and senior educators trusted to make good decisions in their local contexts. School leadership needs to be trusted to determine what policy directions look like in the local context.

5. **Teachers as learners and conditions and incentives to stay teaching.** To keep teaching staff in schools, we need to look at flexible working conditions, good remuneration, physical, psychological and reputational safety, and encourage on-going learning for teachers. Above all teachers need time. More specialist teachers to supplement learning programs will create more time for classroom teachers and create opportunities to connect children with their areas of passion and community events.

## 1. What targets and reforms should be included in the next agreement?

**What targets and reforms should be included in the next agreement** to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a particular focus on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - **for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English**

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We believe a SET of key reform areas and a SET of indicators which measures improvement across the reforms is required. Tying specific targets to each reform results in gaming the system. As illustrated in the learning to read example (p. 3 above), contributions from many of the suggested reform initiatives, contribute to improved reading outcomes.

We suggest a matrix of indicators which measure student progress. These measures should be able to be disaggregated to look at groups of students identified at risk of falling behind. In addition to a range of measures of progress in literacy and numeracy, this matrix of measures should include measures of belonging, student engagement, fitness, access to health services and screening, community engagement and all of the rich indicators of a flourishing education system. Measures of whole of community strength and measures of student belonging/wellbeing<sup>12</sup> need to be included. When the *National Measurement Framework for*

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<sup>11</sup> Denny, L (2022). Primary school matters. Positioning paper: The case for change. [www.primaryfocus.org.au](http://www.primaryfocus.org.au)

<sup>12</sup> See for example the PISA testing questions on 'belonging'. De Bortoli, L (2018). Pisa Australia in focus, number 1: Sense of belonging at school. <https://research.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/30>



*Australian Schools* is reviewed, it should focus on measuring the performance of jurisdictions through sample testing of all indices.

All-in national testing such as NAPLAN is unhelpful. The current NAPLAN testing process is skewing the school experience in detrimental ways. Multiple measures of progress in literacy and numeracy for each student should be a continuous process – not a biennial event. If Ministers want to persist with NAPLAN, then make it sample-based testing and use it to assess the performance of jurisdictions. We recommend it be replaced with in school measures of progress.

We need a **limited, manageable set, of education indicators** to measure the educational performance of jurisdictions and provide guidance for improvement. This set of data should be **focussed on the performance of the system, not the child.**

Without doubt, we need a rich data set to inform us of system progress. This data set can be measures of achievement including measures of literacy and numeracy attainment. We also need to have performance data on students, in particular those in identified target groups. We need this data to inform us if our approaches are having an impact. On this we agree unreservedly.

A theme of this paper is that many reform initiatives impact multiple targets and we don't want to get into the Productivity Commission (and previous NSRA) trap of cause-effect, linear thinking. For example, a priority focus on interagency/allied health services would be expected to improve outcomes for: –

- all of the identified at risk students identified in the scope (*“students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English”*)
- would assist in improving literacy and numeracy targets
- would improve mental health and well being
- and so on...

Examples of indicators that would support a reform initiative linked to allied health provisions for children, might be:

- Cluster/schooling systems share access to allied health and social service professionals
  - every child has access to timely services support wherever they live in Australia
  - all students have had sight and hearing assessments by age five
  - Service coordination managers are appointed to schools/clusters/communities
  - Every Primary School community has the resources to ensure the provision of wrap around services that meet their community's needs



## 2. Student mental health and wellbeing

How the next agreement can contribute to improving **student mental health and wellbeing**, by addressing in-school factors while acknowledging the impact of non-school factors on wellbeing.

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More and more children are presenting with high levels of anxiety.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, there are many contributing factors to this. Some of those under our immediate control include the intensification of expectations that comes through national testing programs such as NAPLAN and a primary curriculum that is so full of content, that it is impossible to teach if taken literally.

Our response to this is not to make another ‘project’. Instead take away some of the intensity. Develop a primary curriculum that creates space and time for children to play. Ensure provision for mental health support is made available through alliances with local health services. Create more planning time for teachers (which allows them to plan and to follow up with concerns about children). Ensure we have prior to school programs which support parents and are a part of forming a relationship between the school and family.

Again, we argue that a focus on integrating services to provide support for children, on increasing engagement and community participation, on strengthening the communities of which schools are a part, are all focuses that will assist in the mitigation of anxiety amongst our children.

## 3. Attract and retain teachers

How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers

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The status of the teaching profession needs to be elevated and pay scales need to be reviewed and increased. In jurisdictions where teachers are well paid, the workforce is more stable, has more capacity and the outcomes are higher.<sup>14</sup>

In the coming years, education is competing with numerous other areas of the workforce in attracting personnel. We must have competitive salaries and this needs to be part of the discussion. There needs to be a significant increase in teacher salary – especially for experienced career teachers. While early career teachers are relatively well placed in financial terms, more experienced teachers reach a level at which their classification and remuneration remains fixed and doesn’t match other professions of similar qualification and expertise.

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<sup>13</sup> Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, growing numbers of young people were experiencing high rates of clinical-level anxiety. About 11.6% of kids had anxiety in 2012, up 20% from 2007. But during the pandemic, those numbers nearly doubled, such that 20.5% of youth worldwide now struggle with anxiety symptoms, according to a meta-analysis of 29 studies [JAMA Pediatrics \(Vol. 175, No. 11, 2021\)](#).

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Cherie Taylor-Patel, President, New Zealand Principals’ Federation.



Remuneration is not the whole story. If we want to connect teachers to their work-place and for them to stay connected with the profession, we also need to substantially improve their conditions. Teachers must have **time** for planning, assessment, and reporting, and these need to become scheduled as part of the working week. But more than this, teachers need to feel valued, to feel they are contributing to something bigger than them, to have the flexibility to respond to their particular group of students. And teachers feel they can do this when children with obvious needs, are able to access assistance and appropriate allied professionals; when the curriculum is sensibly structured; when good curriculum support materials are produced; when national testing focuses on the performance of the jurisdiction and not the child; when specialist teachers are readily available to supplement the teacher's own strengths, thereby enriching student programs.

To keep teaching staff in schools, we need to look at flexible working conditions, good remuneration and encourage on-going learning for teachers.

Above all teachers need time! More specialist teachers to supplement learning programs will create more time for classroom teachers and create opportunities to connect children with their areas of passion and community events.

Teachers become frustrated when children in need of help can't access help in a timely manner. A lack of access to appropriate services often expresses itself as severe and inappropriate behaviour – which in turn sees a number of teachers leaving the workforce. It shouldn't be like this. There are many, many agencies and NGOs providing duplicate services, soaking up much needed resources which are not effectively used. There are too many uncoordinated service providers, none of which individually has the capacity to provide the level of service needed by some children and their families. Allied health-care support in communities is in short supply and particularly hard to access in rural/remote areas of the country. Schools and families need ready access to psychologists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, paediatricians and other services.

This must be a whole of government agenda and we are encouraged by Minister Clare's interest in coordination of services for children from 0 to 8 years of age.

#### 4. Data collection

How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes.

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There is a host of available data that can assist administrators and researchers answer these questions.

We suggest a matrix of indicators which measure student progress. These measures should be able to be disaggregated to look at groups of students identified at risk of falling behind. In addition to a range of measures of progress in literacy and numeracy, this matrix of measures should include measures



of belonging, student engagement, fitness, access to health services and screening, community engagement and all of the rich indicators of a flourishing education system.

Where there is a question where data is needed, let's generate the data at the local level and enable educators in situ to respond appropriately to individual needs and cohort trends.

We want data that is helpful to decision making, that assists us in assessing progress and which can hold us accountable for the expenditure of public funds. We don't want data collection processes that become abused by the press and contributes to more student anxiety.

Perhaps a NSRA priority could be to prioritise the involvement of children in various community activities, in sport teams, in productions. Perhaps the NSRA could prioritise kitchen gardens and good kitchen facilities in all schools so that children can grow and prepare meals for themselves and others. Perhaps we could encourage specialist teachers who can assist with these redirected curriculum priorities – and in the process watch as literacy and numeracy outcomes improve.

## 5. Accountability for public funding

How to ensure public funding is delivering on national agreements and that all school authorities are **transparent and accountable** to the community for how funding is invested and measuring the impacts of this investment.

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We want to be and must be accountable.

We accept our responsibility and do not shirk from accountability based on results. If we have a rich matrix of data that is collected, this should be used to ensure schools and school systems are targeting their human and financial resources to benefit all students and realise the goals of the Alice Springs Declaration.

We wish to target our professional voice to identify key reform areas and a set of indicators which we can use to measure what matters. We advocate that schools have input into policy and process decisions that impact them. While Governments set policy agendas, those policy agendas should be enriched by a school perspective. Recognising the importance of local teams making decisions in their local context is key here too.

What we need to do is to work with schools in the continuing refinement of policy propositions<sup>15</sup>. Working with schools to assess the practicality of policy positions (co-design) creates a mutually respectful partnership and an increased likelihood of policy implementation success. Such an approach allows for greater responsiveness in better meeting the needs of children and should lessen the intensification of work demands

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<sup>15</sup> Stenhouse, L. (1975). An introduction to curriculum research and development. London: Heinemann.

on principals and school staff. Working with schools to review progress and discuss how local responses can be better adjusted to meet policy outcomes is the partnership approach that APPA is advocating.

Karl Weick<sup>16</sup> discussed the concept of educational organisations as loosely coupled systems, contrasted to the more tightly coupled bureaucratic systems they sit within. While there are many aspects of schools which are similar, each school is unique. Their location, local community, needs, available staffing, school size, available resources, support from local agencies... all differ. It is unhelpful to try and manage them as a set of units which will respond in the same way. Weick, and others since, argue that to 'manage' schools effectively, we need to provide a 'tight' framework of expectations which will be managed 'loosely' or flexibly, within each local context.

We argue that the current balance is tilted towards too much central determination without recognition of each school's context. Sometimes outcomes (outputs) are distant from inputs. Children learn at different rates and sometimes surprise us when things all come together. Many students tell stories of a teacher that made a difference, 'a teacher who believed in me and encouraged me to believe in myself.'

APPA is not arguing for a decrease in accountabilities. We want to be accountable. But we call for accountabilities that encourage responsiveness at the local school and system level. There is no 'one-size fits all' approach. In many cases, resourcing schools to enable local decision making is likely to be an effective approach. Principals need to be supported to make locally based decisions and provided with the resources to do so. Top-down models of command and control can be effective in procedural systems. In school systems where nearly every situation is contextual, decision making must be shifted to the school level (with support and guidance in some situations).

A goal of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan is to elevate the profession. Taking seriously the voice of the education profession and enabling experienced educators to make the decisions that will work in their context, will contribute to this admirable goal. By moving away from the increasingly prevalent, compliance and risk aversion approach which is sadly limiting creativity and bespoke solutions, we can reactivate the agile and 'fit for purpose' decision making that fosters and grows positive outcomes in school communities. There are many decisions that should be taken at the local level where the context is known. This means devolving

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<sup>16</sup> Weick, K (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly* Vol 21(1), pp. 1-19



more resources to the school level and trusting senior educators to make good decisions in their local contexts. Trust your leaders.

**Angela Falkenberg**  
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**1 August 2023**

