



# **CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION**

**Response to Consultation Paper  
Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System**

**31 July 2023**

**VISION:** To provide national leadership and advocacy for Catholic School parents to support quality learning and wellbeing for our children and young people.

**MISSION:** Family | Advocacy | Inspiration | Trust | Hope

**VALUES:** Faith | Integrity | Inclusivity | Respect | Engagement

## **Catholic School Parents Australia submission to the Consultation Paper ‘Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System’.**

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Consultation Paper ‘Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System’.

### **About Catholic School Parents Australia**

Catholic School Parents Australia is recognised as the peak, national body representing and advocating for the parents\* of the 794,000 children and young people who attend the 1,759 Catholic schools across Australia. CSPA works in collaboration and consultation with the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) and is recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education.

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) was formed in late 2013 by State and Territory Catholic school parent bodies. Members of CSPA consist of:

Catholic School Parents Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn.

Council of Catholic School Parents NSW.

Catholic School Parents Queensland.

Catholic School Parents South Australia.

Tasmanian Catholic Schools Parents Council.

Catholic School Parents Victoria.

Catholic School Parents Western Australia



[\*It is noted that in this submission, ‘parent’ includes natural, adopted or foster parents, guardians or care givers of children.]

## 1. Introduction

Any conversation pertaining to a better and fairer education system must include parents as key stakeholders in their children's education.

## 2. Lifting student outcomes

The most important outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA go beyond academic performance and need to include, wellbeing, attendance, engagement, and transition (to school/high school and between year levels). Wellbeing can and should be measured. Feeling culturally, physically, and psychologically safe in school contributes to positive wellbeing, improved attendance, and positive engagement and outcomes. A recent survey conducted by CSPA demonstrated that parents are now as concerned about their child's wellbeing as they are about their child's academic outcome. Barker, B. (2023). Catholic School Parent Perspectives on Student Wellbeing and Learning in 2022. Canberra: ARACY.

Attendance is currently measured across most school systems. Parents are made aware in most cases of the legal requirement for their children to attend school, however it is vital that they also understand the importance of attendance on time and every day. To assist, this 'parent friendly' resources should be developed to help parents understand the 'why' attendance is important. This should assist them in understanding the 'scaffolding' nature of learning and that missing a small element of that scaffolding will impact learning down the track.

Over 50 years of research has shown that parent engagement in student learning positively impacts student outcomes, (despite socio-economic status). The research cites the positive outcomes for students, which include; higher academic outcomes; enhanced wellbeing; increased confidence, motivation, and engagement in learning; improved school attendance; more positive attitudes about school and improved behaviour; and continued school enrolment and higher likelihood of graduation. Willis and Exley, 2020

It is time that a national focus is given to embedding parent engagement practices in all schools. Currently there is an ad-hoc approach across Australia but to lift student outcomes for every child in every school this must become a priority. Parent engagement may look different in every school context however this should not be a barrier to school communities looking at how it can work in their individual context.

For optimal engagement in school and learning, the right conditions must be in place for all children. This involves prioritizing their general health and wellbeing. Collaboration between education and health sectors is crucial to ensure families can access necessary screenings and healthcare. Early identification of at-risk children can be achieved through timely and universal access to allied health services with reduced wait times.

To facilitate access for families, a greater integration of health and education services is necessary. Providing allied health services 'in the school gate' would be immensely

beneficial, especially for priority populations. This approach brings essential services to families, enhancing attendance levels by eliminating the need to keep children at home for health appointments and supports families to build their connections, relationships and navigation capabilities with allied services. Moreover, it addresses the lack of understanding about early intervention screening within priority populations, fostering awareness and support through the 'village' in the school gate.

To ensure equitable and effective support for families in the gate, the government must commit to intersectionality. Reliance solely on an already overburdened teaching force for coordination and support of allied services is not sustainable or appropriate. Allied service navigation poses a significant barrier to positive engagement outcomes for priority populations.

Greater access to additional support staff will also assist in ensuring identified children receive access to early intervention learning supports that may not be able to be implemented by a classroom teacher alone.

### **3. Improving student mental health and wellbeing**

When school's place a priority of the wellbeing of their staff, students and their families, the whole community becomes more positive, trusting, supportive and communicative. Improving student mental health and wellbeing must be approached from a preventative perspective addition to a reactive perspective.

Preventative measures such as building resilience and the development of resources to help school communities understand what resilience is will assist in improving student mental health and wellbeing. Programs such as the National Student Wellbeing Program, which has been extended for a further three years, contributes significantly as a preventative mental health and wellbeing measure and should be available to all children.

Embedding a commitment to positive mental health and wellbeing focus into school practice needs to be a national priority. Having it addressed in school audits and ATSI standards will raise the level of importance and accountability in this area.

The CSPA survey of Parent views of children's wellbeing and learning, conducted in 2022 showed that supporting a child's mental health and wellbeing was as much of a concern to parents as were their academic outcomes. Barker, B. (2023). Catholic School Parent Perspectives on Student Wellbeing and Learning in 2022. Canberra: ARACY.

When addressing student mental health and wellbeing it is vital that student voice is heard and responded to. School systems that survey students gain access to authentic student-voice data, necessary to inform decisions impacting student health and wellbeing.

Having consistency in data collection, requiring all schools to collect and analyse data in this area would provide a useful benchmark for schools to reflect and act upon. While

adding a wellbeing target to the National Assessment Program could be beneficial, care would need to be taken to ensure that a one-off, 'moment in time', collection process is not the only measure in this area.

All members of the school community have a responsibility to support children in their learning and wellbeing. Providing opportunities for staff, parents, and children to develop their capacity around supporting each other in their wellbeing would be welcomed. It is important that it is recognised that teachers are not the experts in this area. Systems and processes need to support staff and leaders by creating connections with appropriate allied health services and funding and resources are directed to address the increasing need of support in this area.

Understanding and acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols and practices that may conflict with school expectations, such as Sorry Business, is vital to the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families

#### **4. Attracting and retaining teachers**

Recent media coverage and interviews with teachers leaving the profession has identified that parents are cited as a percentage of the reasons for teachers leaving the profession. This could potentially be mitigated through implementing effective parent engagement strategies. These could include,

- Communicate with families for connection. This contributes to the development of positive trusting relationships between all members of the school community.
- Ensure that early career teachers have access to professional learning on how to build positive relationships with parents. This should occur during pre-service teach training and during the early years of their career.
- Schools being encouraged to develop, with their community, (students, teachers, and parents) communication policies which contribute to positive school communities.
- Schools being encouraged to develop, with their community, (students, teachers, and parents), code of conducts that support positive relationships between all members of the school's community.
- Having effective and positive transition processes that involve the whole family.

Reducing the administrative burden and red tape to allow teachers to spend more time building professional learning relationships with their students.

There would be huge benefits to the teaching profession moving to a national registration system, allowing greater flexibility for teachers to move within the country.

A more streamlined process of registering international teachers would be beneficial to attracting qualified teachers to Australia.

## 5. Data collection

All data collected on student's should be accessible to parents in parent friendly language. For parents to engage with their child's learning it is imperative they understand their child's progress.

It is crucial that all teachers access the data available to them and can use it to inform teaching practise. Teachers must be given opportunities to develop skills in the process of analysing data and using it to inform teaching practise.

The Productivity Commission and AERO have identified the need for longitudinal data to identify the actual students at risk of falling behind based on their performance (and not on equity groups alone) and to monitor these students' progress over time. CSPA believes that this demonstrates a commitment to **all** children and their ability to reach their full potential.

The national USI provides a continuity of learning across all systems. It helps to easily access academic records and provides less opportunities for student's to 'fall through the gaps.

## 6. Transparency of and accountability for school funding.

CSPA believe that all children should be able to access public funding towards their education.

The current needs-based funding model directs funding to schools who are most in needs of support. As with any system there are anomalies that occur and the process to have these discussed needs to be clear and consistent. The loadings attached to funding always need a focus on disadvantaged students with a clear definition of disadvantage which takes many forms. Those with special educational learning needs are among our most vulnerable students and families and government funding to support them to achieve to the best of their potential should be a priority.

Systems and local schools are best placed to know where funding should be allocated to best meet education priorities and needs. School staff know their students and their needs and where the focus needs to be to improve educational outcomes for all students. Catholic Schools work with families to support students in their learning and wellbeing and local school boards and parent bodies participate in these discussions.

Catholic Schools are already publicly accountable in many ways. They must report to the Federal Government, State and Territory Governments, ASIC, ACNC, ACARA through My School website, Families in the school and other bodies in their state or territory. Information is provided publicly on school websites through annual reports. Catholic Education Systems also must publish their funding mechanisms on their websites for public information. In some state/territories, Catholic School authorities also have an

MOU with their State/Territory Government around their Commonwealth funding which is another accountability.

Bi-lateral agreements are agreed between the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments with little input from Catholic Schools in most cases. CSPA would like to see it stipulated that meaningful discussions with the non-government sector are stipulated before signing the bi-lateral agreements. Catholic Education authorities have no responsibility in signing these agreements but must abide by whatever the state/territory agrees to.

The funding for Public Schools is Treasury to Treasury and so accountabilities differ from Catholic Schools for these schools. We believe that not all these various accountabilities are recognised by governments and CSPA believes that we have significant processes and that no more processes are needed and in fact, would support a more streamlined process for our schools to lessen this workload.

When bi-lateral agreements are being developed we believe that all sectors should be included in the discussion with state/territory governments so there is clear and consistent agreement about Commonwealth funding. These discussions would then highlight the effect that these decisions might have on non government schools across their jurisdiction.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

CSPA Recommendations for a better and fairer education system:

1. **Inclusive Parent Engagement:** Involve parents as key stakeholders in their children's education by implementing a national focus on embedding parent engagement practices in all schools. Prioritize consistent parent engagement across all school contexts to lift student outcomes for every child.
2. **Comprehensive Wellbeing Measurement:** Expand the scope of student outcomes measured in the National School Readiness Assessment (NSRA) to include wellbeing, attendance, engagement, and transition. Develop "parent-friendly" resources to emphasize the importance of regular attendance and collaborate with health services to ensure timely access to allied health support on school sites.
3. **Integrated On-Site Service Model:** To achieve equitable access to comprehensive support for students and families while reducing coordination burdens and administration challenges to the school, an integrated on-site service model should be implemented. This collaborative approach brings together education, health, and allied services, establishing multidisciplinary teams within the school. By fostering early intervention and ensuring timely access to necessary screenings and allied health services, this model enhances the overall support system for students and families, creating a more efficient and effective learning environment.

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4. **Enhancing Student Mental Health and Wellbeing:** Prioritize student mental health and wellbeing as a national priority. Implement preventative measures, such as building resilience, and make programs like the National Student Wellbeing Program available to all children. Integrate a wellbeing target in the NSRA to hold schools accountable for addressing mental health concerns and collect consistent data to inform decision-making.
5. **Strengthening Teacher Retention:** Develop effective parent engagement strategies to improve teacher-parent relationships and reduce reasons for teachers leaving the profession. Provide early career teachers with training on building positive relationships with parents. Simplify administrative processes to allow teachers to focus on building professional relationships with students. Move towards a national registration system for teachers to increase flexibility and attract qualified educators.
6. **Transparent Data Collection:** Ensure that all data collected on students is accessible to parents in parent-friendly language. Encourage teachers to use data to inform teaching practices effectively. Develop a longitudinal data collection system to monitor student progress and identify students at risk of falling behind.
7. **Transparent School Funding:** Implement needs-based funding to target higher levels of support to disadvantaged students and schools, reducing educational inequity. Maintain consistency in funding shares within each sector and ensure accountability for how funding is utilized for educational purposes.