



AASE Submission NSRA Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

The Australian Association of Special Education Inc. (AASE) is a broadly based national organisation that advocates for the provision of quality educational services for people with special educational needs. The *National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) Consultation Paper* (p7) identifies 22.5% of school students as having a disability, many of whom will have special education needs. AASE recognises the potential role that the next *National School Reform Agreement* could play in securing better outcomes for these students and for students 'at risk' of falling behind.

In this submission AASE has focussed on questions within the Consultation Paper of particular relevance to students with special education needs. In preparing its submission AASE has considered findings of the *Review of the National School Reform Agreement* recorded in the *Study Report Overview* (Productivity Commission, December 2022). AASE's submission also considers the complexity of supporting students with disability.

Ensuring that education systems across the country respond equitably to the needs of students with disability presents an enormous challenge. With respect to students with disability, multiple agendas feed into requirements placed on education providers at all levels (systems, schools, and teachers).

The *NSRA Consultation Paper* identifies a number of national bodies that support and monitor the education system including:

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITSL)
- Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)
- Education Services Australia (ESA)
- The National School Resourcing Board (NSRB).

Additional to the above, relevant to students with disabilities are:

- The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (and subsequent reviews of these standards)
- The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD)
- The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The complexity of provision for students with disability necessitates ways of thinking about data collection broader than those agreed to for the previous NSRA. As noted in the Productivity Commission Review 2022:

“Parties should ensure the next school reform agreement reflects new commitments and ways of working.

Since agreeing the NSRA (sic), governments have made further national commitments to support young people who are at higher risk of experiencing educational disadvantage, including through the *2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, and *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031*. These

agreements represent a fundamental change to the way schools respond to the needs of their students. (underline added)

Some of these commitments (such as those relating to shared decision-making and transforming the way governments respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and the vision for inclusive education under Australia’s Disability Strategy) will significantly shape how governments develop and implement reforms under the next school reform agreement. These commitments will need to be reflected across the schools reform agenda — from teacher and leadership training through to performance reporting.” (underline added)

Productivity Commission 2022

The Disability Standards for Education (2005), require Australian educators to make adjustments for students with disability in consultation with the family and the student. The 2020 review of the Education component of the Disability Standards (2005), reported a need to amend standards to “include principles on consultation” (Recommendation 2, p. vii).

Under the DSE: Teachers must consult with agencies or people who provide support services to students with disability. The education provider is required to facilitate the provision of specialist services “through collaborative arrangements” when deemed to be reasonable and necessary. The significance of this requirement has taken on a new meaning now that so many school students are accessing support through the NDIS.

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD), underpinned by the DSE, necessarily requires collaboration and consultation. Across education systems throughout Australia specialist educators within school systems and specialist providers through the NDIS feature. **Given the inclusive nature of Australian schools, AASE believes that more specific content related to collaborative practices/skills should also be reflected in AITSL teacher and principal standards and in professional learning at all levels, including for school leaders and principals.**

From the *Study Report Overview, 2022*

Governments should advance reforms to:

- *support quality teaching and effective school leadership: priorities could include reducing low-value tasks and out-of-field teaching, disseminating best practice, and producing evidence-backed resources that teachers and leaders trust and use — the last of these could be the basis of new National Policy Initiatives (NPIs)* (underline added)
- *support all students to achieve basic levels of literacy and numeracy: tens of thousands of students do not achieve basic levels of literacy and numeracy each year. The next school reform agreement should include specific targets and measures to support these students.*

Productivity Commission 2022

In an inclusive education system both dot points above require input from specialist educators with qualifications and experience in teaching students with special education needs from the outset of planning. AASE strongly supports the work of AERO in disseminating evidence-based practice but notes that AERO is yet to have a specific project related to students with significant disability. Many of the resources available on the AERO site are supportive of students with learning difficulties needing ‘supplementary

adjustments' as defined with NCCD or as 'at risk' withing NSRA documents but resources addressing the needs of students with significant cognitive disability are not yet evident.

Where to with the National Policy Initiatives (NPIs)?

On 15 December 2022, Education Ministers announced that they had made progress on the two substantive NPIs that remain incomplete — the USI and OFAI. They agreed on a model to roll out the USI nationally to all school students. Ministers also endorsed a pathway forward on the OFAI, which will leverage and align existing resources from New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland to establish a national bank of assessments that jurisdictions can use on an opt-in basis. (underline added)

Productivity Commission 2022

Online Formative Assessment Initiative (OFAI)

On the OSFI website we are informed that learning progressions have been developed and that the online resources, with associated professional learning, will be progressively rolled out from 2022. In 2022 members of AASE viewed a version of this tool during its development phase and expressed the view that:

- The online formative assessment tool with accompanying resources currently under development may be helpful for students who are accessing a 'mainstream' curriculum and who participate in NAPLAN but it was not evident that the tool was inclusive of students with complex special education needs.
- AASE recognised the formative assessment tool with accompanying resources has the potential to be an exciting and productive support to teachers but would like to see the content extended to be more inclusive of the full range of students with special education needs.

Reports available on the OFAI website provide no information about the level of consultation and involvement of specialist educators in the development of the assessment tool or accompanying teaching resources. To date the OFAI website does not provide specific information about the assessments or resources that have been developed. AASE expresses some concern that the needs of some students with disabilities (and their teachers) may not be met by this tool. AASE has not been invited to participate in consultation or development of resources beyond the brief 2022 presentation and as such does not have detailed knowledge of its current form and content. AASE acknowledges that some listed contributors may have special education expertise.

AASE would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of resources for students with disability/special education needs. AASE strongly recommends the inclusion of qualified and experienced special educators on any team charged with developing online resources to address the needs of such students. Too often special education expertise is sought as an add on after crucial decisions have been made and changes are not possible.

AASE notes that use of the OFAI will be opt in. It would be informative to have states report on the use of the tool. Linking the use of the tool with a student's USI and with student and school literacy and numeracy data may yield valuable information for evaluation purposes. This is consistent with the recommendation that "Reducing the proportion of students who do not meet basic levels of literacy and numeracy should be a priority for the next intergovernmental school reform agreement." (Productivity Commission 2022 p35)

Data on teacher feedback on the value of the tool should also be collected.

NSRA Consultation Paper

“Every student should be supported as a whole person and enabled to meet their potential by having their learning needs met. Education should be inclusive and delivered in a culturally responsive manner. It should achieve equity across all schools, recognising the needs of all students. Finally, appropriate measures of success should be clearly defined, while leveraging existing data.” (Page 9 Consultation Paper) (underline added)

“Quality teaching is the most important in-school factor affecting student learning. Evidence-based instructional practices, supported by a well-designed and well-delivered curriculum, are key to meeting Australia’s goal of excellent and equitable learning outcomes for all students.” (p 17)

Response to the NSRA Consultation Paper: Questions particularly relevant to students with disability.

Chapter 2 - Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind (p. 20)

Q1 - What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?

Currently there is no accountability within educational systems for students who do not sit the NAPLAN tests. If students with disability are genuinely having access to the Australian curriculum, there should be a means to show they are learning new skills and knowledge from that curriculum. For students with significant intellectual disability growth over time needs to be measured.

Individual education plans (under a variety of names) developed in collaboration with families and other stakeholders that include academic, social, communication and behaviour goals have the potential to provide a level of accountability and provide a means of measuring growth in students' learning over time.

NCCD processes stipulate adjustments provided to students be recorded and learning progress monitored. An examination of how school and system based NCCD data could be included in data collected for NSRA purposes is warranted. AASE recognises that currently NCCD data is not linked to USI and that NCCD data submitted is limited.

Given recognition in the *Mparntwe Education Declaration* that excellence in education should enable all students to achieve their ambitions and realise their potential, data should be collected on students with disability including on their post school outcomes.

Q2 - What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems, and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind?

AASE has provided a response to the **Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper on Initial Teacher Education** strongly endorsing the focus on evidence-based teaching practices and the scientific theories supporting them. As noted in the 2022 Review, it will take some time for the effects of any ITE reform to impact learning outcomes for at risk learners. In this

regard, it should be mandated in all ITE programs that there is an explicit focus on evidence-based, effective teaching practices to support the range of student diverse learning needs.

Ensuring all existing teachers, leaders and principals have an understanding of the evidence-based practices and core content proposed for ITE courses is important. This is consistent with the recommendation that the next school reform agreement should include specific targets and measures to support at risk students.

AASE supports the use of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model, which includes a school-wide, multi-level system of instruction; high-quality classroom instruction; universal student screening; evidence-based interventions provided on a sliding scale of intensity; and continuous, data-based progress monitoring. This model supports individual students' learning needs, including the needs of those who are falling behind or at risk of falling behind (Tier 3 and Tier 2). (p17)

Within such a model AASE believes that qualified special educators would be the teachers best placed to work collaboratively with classroom teachers to assess, program for, teach and monitor the progress of students most at risk of falling behind and those who are deemed to be in need of Tier 3 support. Policies could be directed towards providing at least one full-time qualified special educator in every school to deliver and/or oversee such targeted instruction. Reporting of progress towards the provision of such specialist educators could be included in the NSRA.

Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?

Learning profiles of students at risk of falling behind are often complex. Evidence based practices such as explicit instruction must be part of interventions for students 'at risk', but students' learning needs and challenges should be assessed on an individual basis. AASE advocates for individualised instruction rather than assigning particular approaches to different 'cohorts' of at-risk students.

Chapter 3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing (p. 26)

Q8 - What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government, and the community to deliver this?

We agree that some students face social/emotional difficulties created by factors outside the school environment. Struggling with academic skills is likely to have a significant impact on students' wellbeing. Successful learning experiences at school will contribute to a student's sense of self-worth and may go some way towards mitigating the negative effects of difficult home and community experiences. **All students can be successful learners, given the right instruction.** As identified in the Consultation Paper, intervention/support provided in the early years of schooling is essential for 'at risk' students.

Chapter 4: Our current and future teachers (p. 31)

Q17 - What change(s) would support qualified teachers to return to the profession?

Q19 - What can be done to attract a diverse group of people into the teaching profession to ensure it looks like the broader community?

Q21 - What reforms could enable the existing teacher workforce to be deployed more effectively?

AASE strongly advocates that learning support teachers/consultants, specialist educators/teachers and transition specialists, have a qualification in special education or inclusive education that incorporates the following components:

- Curriculum-based assessment, functional behavioural assessment and monitoring of student learning
- Effective programming, including the development of appropriate individual plans and the reporting of progress against these plans
- Effective explicit teaching strategies in basic literacy and numeracy skills; cognitive skills, pro-social behaviour skills, self-help skills and communication skills
- Teaching, mentoring and modelling effective practices for other teachers and teacher aides
- Effective collaboration with families and inclusion of families as partners in the development of IEPs, and
- Skills in identifying evidence-based practice.

Appointment of such specialists will allow schools to build inclusive practices that are supportive of the learning needs of students 'at risk' and students with significant disability who need highly individualised learning programs. Such teachers can act as mentors and coaches and should be recognised as 'specialists' or lead teachers who receive financial recognition of their advanced training and expertise. Education systems can work towards the achievement of this goal.

Chapter 5: Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes (p. 35)

Q28 - Should data measurement and reporting on outcomes of students with disability be a priority under the next NSRA? If so, how can this data be most efficiently collected?

Data relating to outcomes for students with disability should most definitely be a priority. The challenge is how to do this without adding to teacher workload. Given the current situation whereby data relating to outcomes for students with disability is not collected, a staged introduction of relevant data collection is most likely the most practical approach.

Further development of the OFAI tool so that it is inclusive of assessment and resources for the full range of students may be a way of collecting data without adding to teacher workload. Alternatively, development of a specific online platform designed to support students with disabilities and their teachers such that data is recorded and NCCD requirements a simultaneously met may be an option. Post school outcomes could also be recorded.