

2 August 2023

Review to Inform a Better Fairer Education System

The Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Expert panel on the National School Reform Agreement consultation paper.

The Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) is the national professional association for public primary school principals in Australia. AGPPA represents over 5300 principals in public primary schools in every corner of every state and territory. It is worth noting that this body is representative of over half of all schools in Australia.

AGPPA's National Council includes representatives from six states and two territories, with two members representing each jurisdiction. This group represents a shared national commitment to highlight the importance of the primary years and to promote excellence in public primary education in Australia. Our advocacy is based on the vision of every child attending a school with healthy, high-performing leaders and quality staff, along with the knowledge that primary schools are where Australian children acquire the necessary foundational academic, social and emotional skills to lead fulfilled and enriched lives. It is imperative that our education policy enables this noble intent, so that all children can experience such success, both at school and through later life.

AGPPA initiatives, actions and projects are research informed and aim to assist in making Australia's education system a beacon for all. This aim is perhaps best enunciated using the words of David Gonski, Chair of the Review of Funding for Schooling expert panel, who said:

"Every child should have access to the best possible education, regardless of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend."

Just as importantly, Dr Philip Riley (Chief Investigator of the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Surveys) reminds us:

"Today's children are tomorrow's nation builders. We owe it to them and ourselves to give them the best opportunities we can."

Our submission is based upon the professional opinions and experiences of public primary school leaders, AGPPA position papers, reports and research projects undertaken on behalf of AGPPA. AGPPA believes strongly in having a high quality and high equitable education system, this should be a fundamental objective of the National Schools Reform Agreement. The evidence is clear that the former Agreement failed to properly recognise and provide for such in our government primary schools around Australia. The current review being undertaken is a once in a generation opportunity to positively impact and shape the education system in Australia. This rebuilding our nations schooling system should start in government primary schools which are the foundation of communities throughout the country.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration prioritises an education system that promotes excellence and equity, and supports all young Australians to become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community. The previous National School Reform Agreement failed to deliver this objective most notably for government primary school students. This statement encapsulates what should be central to the next National School Reform Agreement.

Drivers of Student Outcomes

It is our firm belief that the previous National School Reform Agreement had too much focus on “end results” such as Year 12 attainment without the recognition that for students to attain Year 12 qualifications, they first need to be engaged and successful students in the primary years. Whilst we agree that this is a worthy overall objective, this country requires every Year 6 students to leave primary school with high levels of literacy and numeracy, be healthy and have a love of learning instilled in them. By having these attributes students will want to attend school, feeling valued, achieving and ready to take on the many wonderful opportunities secondary schools have to offer. To do so, our government primary schools require appropriate resourcing and recognition from their respective State Governments as well as the Federal Government. Across Australia we are seeing too many students not completing primary school. This is significantly for Aboriginal students and students with disabilities of which 84% attend Government primary schools. This is not to say that our primary schools are not doing a “good job”, but underpins the lack of importance placed on the primary sector, especially in government schools and this is highlighted by three key resourcing factors:

- Primary SRS being significantly lower than secondary (over \$3105 differential)
- Funding to Government schools being limited to less than 90% of the SRS in most states and territories across Australia. When the % discounts are applied many states and territories are funding at less 65% when they should be funding government primary schools at 80%.
- Currently 1/3 of Independent and Catholic schools receive more government funding than 50% of government primary schools.

We need to recognise the special opportunity that primary schools can provide for students to succeed to become successful young Australians, but this is not driven purely by “high stakes testing” such as NAPLAN.

If we were to not fully service a car, when the car does not work properly should we blame the mechanic who serviced the car or the owner who refused to pay the proper amount required to maintain the vehicle. In this country we blame schools, in particular government schools for poor NAPLAN and PISA results, when in fact we should be blaming the federal and state governments who for over a decade have underfunded government public schools. In the last ten years government primary schools have been underfunded by one whole year of funding based on the minimum GONSKI funding recommended.

National Targets

AGPPA is calling for a complete suspension on national and international testing programs such as NAPLAN and PISA until government primary schools are funded to 100% of SRS. The suspension should remain in place until two years after the last state or territory implements the full SRS funding for their schools to allow time for the funding to impact.

Primary school teaching is a highly specialised profession as teachers are required to have knowledge of all learning areas, whilst supporting the social and emotional development of each individual student. These are the critical formation years for students and it is AGPPA's position that more needs to be done to ensure that leaders, teachers and schools are properly equipped to do this important work. In addition, Government Primary Schools are one of the only Government Departments in many towns across Australia and are seen as the bed rock of many of these communities. Issues associated with staffing, housing and isolation further impinges on their ability to provide the best for all children in Australia.

While the audience for the National School Reform Agreement remains the wider education community, including Schools, Education Departments and State and Federal Governments, successful enaction of the intent of this agreement and future such agreements requires an empowering of principals, teachers and school communities. This can only occur if the current focus on drivers such as external accountability characterised by high stakes testing is replaced by more

appropriate measures which measure the impact of schooling on students that reflects the values and aspirations of Australia, not the United States. After more than 15 years of NAPLAN as a critical driver, the research identifies that this has not worked.

This sentiment is echoed by educational experts like Pasi Sahlberg who has regularly commented on the focus on national testing in many jurisdictions around the world. He laments that what is most worrying: *'is the shift of teachers' and students' attention from teaching and learning for understanding towards being successful in high stake tests and exams'*.

The importance of teachers in the learning process is well acknowledged as a critical driver of student outcomes.

Despite this critical importance, Professor Donna Cross from the University of Western Australia indicates that *'Teachers report the highest level of occupational stress in Australia, the United Kingdom and America'*, when compared to other occupations.

Key issues contributing to these concerns included:

- *excessive workload and working hours*
- *poor student behaviour including lack of motivation and effort, disrespect, violence, challenging authority*
- *management of bullying, and reactive management strategies*
- *aggression from pupils and parents*
- *classroom and school climate*

Wellbeing at the school level is also adversely affected by the propensity of governments and bureaucracies to impose additional responsibilities on schools without considering what else should be removed to make space for the added expectations. This has been exacerbated even further in recent years by an overcrowded primary curriculum.

National Policy Initiatives

The measures identified in the previous National School Reform Agreement prioritise academic performance using NAPLAN. This fails to recognise the fundamental element of engagement. This has resulted in a "pushing down" of the curriculum, at the exclusion of quality pedagogy which recognises the age and ability of our primary school age children.

As Professor Alan Reid states in *Building our Nation Through Public Education: AGPPA 2016*

'If the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians is to be taken seriously, then the public purpose goals it sets out should be used as the benchmark for assessment. The sorts of questions that might be asked of policies, programs and practices would relate to the extent to which they contribute to the wider social good or community benefit. These would include consideration about whether they:

- *Help to develop capacities for democratic participation*
- *Contribute to the health of the whole system*
- *Include rather than exclude*
- *Support a quality education for all*
- *Promote a culture of collaboration*
- *Model democratic decision-making*

He also adds:

'...the government needs to make the Melbourne Goals the touchstone for its policy making, rather than consigning it to the margins'.

Likewise, we would argue that the Mparntwe goals are firmly in the sights of decision makers in framing the next National School Reform Agreement.

Given that the new National Schools Reform Agreement will be central in the development of future Bilateral Funding Agreements the formation of the agreement is critical.

AGPPA Key Reform Areas for the next NSRA.

AGPPA is concerned that the new National School Reform Agreement will focus on the failed areas of the previous agreement which have had no impact on student learning outcomes and will continue to not enhance these outcomes. We believe this, because of the assumption that seems to be in place, that improvement can be addressed by a series of individual initiatives rather than a more integrated approach. AGPPA is looking for an integrated approach which focuses on a limited number of key priorities, which together, collectively address multiple targets and results in progress towards the goals of the Alice Springs Declaration.

Policy makers must consider any policy proposition from the perspective of schools – and that perspective is of the school as a whole, not the multiple competing demands of numerous silos. When the bureaucracy is organised in silos, each of which transmits their edicts to schools without the crucial test of practicality, this adds to intensification of work for school practitioners. This disconnected ‘bits’ approach to policy is evident 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. But it is creating mayhem and must be addressed.

AGPPA suggests a focus on the following limited number of key reform areas, will result in substantial improvements in multiple targets and be manageable for schools and systems.

Six Key Reform Focus Areas for the next NSRA:

1. **Coordinated support for children (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 (patches) is one 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.
2. **A focus on learning and development of a primary curriculum.** We need a primary curriculum put together by primary experts.
3. **Accountability and NAPLAN.** NAPLAN must be used to assess the performance of jurisdictions. All in NAPLAN testing is skewing the school experience in detrimental ways and must become sample-based testing. Student progress should be monitored much more regularly with appropriate testing. As stated earlier we believe a suspension of NAPLAN should occur until government primary schools are funded to 100% of SRS.
4. **Resourcing for primary education and prior to school programs is a priority.** More resources must be devolved to the school level and senior educators trusted to make good decisions in their local contexts.
5. **Local Decision Making** – school leadership needs to be trusted to determine what policy directions look like in the local context.
6. **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 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. Coordinated support for children (interagency coordination), provision of allied health and social services

To be a true mechanism for reform, the NSRA must extend beyond schools, to the myriad agencies and services children and their families have to deal with. If we want true school reform, we must have coherent, joined up services that work with children and families in need. The many resources available across agencies and NGOs, must change from the current ethos of scarcity and 'passing the funding buck' to one of providing service. A child's world doesn't consist of separate entities such as siloed government agencies, social welfare systems, voluntary organisations, family and friends. A child's world intersects with all of these. It is a reminder to us that a fragmented policy approach to addressing the complexity of children's lives is mechanistic and shallow.

The more locally we can place services staff, the more quickly we can provide early intervention and proactive service supports. Combining resources across agencies in supporting people in local areas is a significant strategy we should explicitly pursue. Many of the areas of high disadvantage are already well known. Allow Education to take the lead in these communities, however ensure schools are more than well resourced and principals are remunerated for their work and provided with associated staff to make it work effectively and efficiently.

2. A focus on learning and development of a primary curriculum

The current primary and early childhood curriculum is too crowded, impossible to teach if taken literally, and is based on outdated models of curriculum, steeped in coverage. The curriculum documents are a subject based approach which comes from High Schools and Universities. The research identifies that student outcomes have not improved since it was implemented. We must make teacher workload manageable and we can do this by developing a primary curriculum which reflects teaching realities.

Student engagement has declined in this country as identified by the productivity commission. To enhance attendance and student achievement we need students engaged in their learning and developing a deep love of learning. If students develop a love of learning, the evidence identifies they better engage in education and improve literacy and numeracy outcomes in the process. Every student in this country matters and we want them attending school regularly and not only attending but engaging in their learning. Developing a new national primary school curriculum which has a focus on literacy and numeracy together with activities which make students a part of their communities, and makes them active citizens early in life is critical. Our curriculum needs to be a well-rounded curriculum and includes the things that we value as a country such as sport, art, drama, music and productions. These things are highly valued in the country and build communities and have been lost over the last fifteen years due to an obsession around NAPLAN which has narrowed the curriculum to a dangerous level. We want children to feel they belong and activities which involve building a community are the things that connect kids and make them a part of the community and the community part of schools

3. Accountability and NAPLAN

AGPPA contends all-in national testing, creates a cycle of competition for better NAPLAN results and in the process, redirects teaching towards a greater focus on test outcomes. This is well intentioned but wrong - with the unintended consequence of redirecting teaching to a narrower focus on the 'basics' with conversely, **less engagement of children with schooling**, and *less job satisfaction for teachers*.

National testing should be used to assess the performance of educational jurisdictions. This can be achieved by comprehensive sample testing, not national testing of all children. Feedback on the progress of individual children is much more effectively addressed through regular in-school testing. NAPLAN only provides belated feedback for a particular student, once every two years and is best used to gather system information and feedback - **through sample testing**.

Accountability – AGPPA advocates for the establishment of a manageable matrix of measures to assess the health of the whole system. 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**. Further this matrix should be expanded to provide measures of whole of community strength and measures of student belonging/wellbeing¹. When the *National Measurement Framework for Australian Schools* is reviewed, it should focus on measuring the performance of jurisdictions through sample testing of all indices.

AGPPA are calling on the Federal Government to lead and fund a national summit to co-design with the profession, a new assessment and accountability framework that will replace NAPLAN. The aim of the summit is to bring together leading primary educators from across the country to design and develop a framework that truly measures the attributes, skills and knowledge of students that this country values. Parents and educators know that NAPLAN does not measure the right attributes in their students. AGPPA believe it is time for this country to develop a modern student learning matrix that is valued by parents and the profession.

4. Resourcing

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. AGPPA 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.

5. Local Decision Making

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).

We need to take seriously, the ability of experienced educators to make good decisions to suit their context and to move away from the increasingly prevalent, management by clipboard and checklist approach which is sadly killing initiative and creativity. There are many decisions that should be taken at the local level where the context is known. This means devolving more resources to the school level and trusting senior educators to make good decisions in their local contexts. Trust your leaders.

6. Teachers as learners and conditions and incentives to stay teaching

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.

In the future, 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.

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.

What will happen if government primary schools are properly funded.

Retain and hire experts and support staff to help all students, especially those with complex learning and health needs.

Research suggests students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds would *most* benefit from adequate and additional resources. This includes relevant professional support staff. Adequate resourcing as soon as possible for government schools would also allow school staff time and resources to link children with support services that might be needed out-of or in-conjunction with available school support.

Primary schools would be better resourced in terms of teachers and educational resources (in music, arts, sports).

Currently, Australian government schools face greater teacher shortages, have far more teachers teaching out-of-field, have fewer educational materials and poorer quality infrastructure than do private schools. The ability to foster wellbeing for students needs to start in primary schools so that we adopt a proactive approach to student wellbeing and mental health. Early investment for the country makes economic sense rather than reactively trying to address mental health issues in teenagers and adults.

Primary schools could invest in working with the community and parents/guardians to support students' engagement and learning.

Schools that can invest in fostering strong and positive relationships with children's parents/guardians and community can develop these important relationships to enrich children's learning and wellbeing. This, in turn, can also foster greater wellbeing in families and schools. Resources are required to cultivate these vital community and family connections.

Improvement in student achievement and decrease in learning gaps between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students in government schools.

More money for socioeconomically disadvantaged students and schools is a way to improve overall student outcomes and to particularly decrease learning gaps between more socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged children.

Primary priority

Once governments agree to prioritise fully funding government schools to the SRS, a priority for funding distribution of full funding should be government primary schools.

Research consistently shows that the highest rate of human, social and economic returns come from investment in children as early as possible. According to a review of global literature, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos find that "primary education continues to exhibit the highest social profitability in all world regions."

Nobel Prize winner James Heckman's famous Heckman Curve proves "the economic benefits of investing early and building skill upon skill to provide greater success to more children and greater productivity and reduce social spending for society".

Australian government primary schools are where children with the most additional and complex developmental and learning needs go to school. The sooner these schools are fully funded, the

sooner they can adequately meet their children's learning and developmental needs. This would help stop educational inequities closer to where they start.

In conclusion, if we want to provide a better and fairer start to all in Australia, we must prioritise adequate investment in primary schools, especially primary schools with higher concentrations of disadvantaged students. This is our best options, both educationally and economically for achieving our goals for schooling in Australia.

Kind regards,

Patrick Murphy
President
Australian Government Primary Principals Association.

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