

## Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

A response to the Consultation Paper from Australian Learning Lecture, 3 August 2023.



The Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) appreciates this opportunity to respond to the Consultation Paper. In doing so we draw on our collective experience in the management and reform of schools, and the policy framework impacting on them.

We acknowledge and support the analysis and initiatives suggested in chapters three (student mental health) and four (current and future teachers). However, our focus on chapters one, two, five and six is based on our concern that even the best initiatives in school reform may continue to fall short if problems and barriers in the overall framework of schools – especially those arising out of increasingly concentrated disadvantage - are not addressed.

### Our recommendations

Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) believes that long-term solutions to key problems highlighted by the panel require a new overall framework for Australia's schools. To facilitate attention to framework issues the panel should recommend a process to broaden the focus of the next and subsequent NSRAs.

This should include, but not be limited to:

1. Developing a clear, contemporary rationale for our current framework, including Australia's dual system of publicly funded schools.
2. Reviewing the remits of existing agencies with the consideration of establishing a separate independent body to focus and report on equity in schooling, including social segregation and its impact on student outcomes.
3. Establishing a common framework for all Australian schools and exploring and assessing common framework models in other countries

### Building on the lead from the Consultation Paper

The Consultation Paper indicates that the panel is aware of the implications of increasingly concentrated disadvantage for school and system achievement. This is reflected in many parts of the Paper, including in the statement that "the education system should provide the support all students require to succeed, while being careful not to introduce additional forms of disadvantage through the design of the education system itself" (p.14).



This statement indicates a welcome awareness of wider structural issues alongside a continuing commitment to school level reform. In this wider context, the well-documented decline in overall student achievement over the last decade has taken place alongside an increasing divergence of student enrolments based on family and school SES. Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) maintains that a process of school reform which does not address “the design of the education system itself” risks undermining the purpose and the focus of the NSRA.

The Consultation Paper confirms the impact of peers on student achievement, citing evidence suggesting that “the learning outcomes of students who are behind, falling behind or at risk of falling behind are negatively influenced in schools with higher concentrations of students experiencing educational disadvantage.” (p.14). It seems logical that reform initiatives should address the reasons for increasing concentrations of disadvantage, as well as improving within-school practice.

ALL understands that this is a longer-term task. Given the terms of reference and the structure of the NSRA, it is unlikely that this review will recommend substantial structural change of the school education sector. But commitment to wider system change should be now flagged as essential.

The Panel has made a tentative start by recognising that “further analysis is needed to identify the full impact on student learning of concentrations of disadvantage in the Australian education system.”

To strengthen this intention, ALL **recommends** that the Panel strengthen the wording of the Consultation Paper to the problem and need for solutions. This includes:

- In 2.3, replace “The evidence suggests” with “The evidence shows”. The Gonski Review in 2011 used “confirm” in relation to such evidence – and as recently as May this year, research by Michael Sciffer and others has quantified the learning time lost.
- In the light of what we know about concentrated disadvantage, the information provided in 2.3.1 (p.15) is relevant. It strongly implies that the deterioration in student outcomes over time and stage of schooling cannot be divorced from increasing enrolment segregation, both over time and between school stages. But suggestions in 2.4 on reducing the concentration of disadvantage are shrouded in ambivalent language, including “could produce”, “often improved” and “suggests”.

Such ambivalence weakens the centrality of this core problem.

### **Recommendation 1:**

**We need a clear, contemporary rationale for our dual system of publicly funded schools.**

Major reviews have avoided asking what should be a foundation question: What are the purposes of funding schools, including resourcing two quite different, competing and even incompatible sectors?

In 2011 Chris Ryan and Luke Sibieta explained the problem in this way:

*“... no government, at either the state or Commonwealth level, has ever been explicit about what the continuing funding for private schooling is now meant to achieve, other than via vague justifications that it facilitates parental choice, which it appears to do only to a partial degree. **In the absence of a clear, contemporary policy goal, it is impossible to measure the extent to which the private schools funding program is achieving its purpose...** accountability for the expenditure of public funds of the magnitude involved requires a clear, contemporary statement of the purpose of funding for private schooling, so that its impact can be properly evaluated.”<sup>1</sup>*

The current review devotes considerable resources to improving the collection and reporting of data, but within the parameters of a system which lacks a clearly stated rationale, it is difficult to properly evaluate whether we are achieving our goals.

It isn't enough just to assume practices and claimed benefits which might change over time, might disappear, or may never have existed in the first place. Key questions to be asked include: Is the purpose of funding competing schools and sectors to increase choice? Did we intend that choice should only be available to those who can pay? Did we believe that our hybrid public/private system would improve overall student achievement? How has that worked out? Is the purpose to save taxpayers' money? Who is monitoring and reporting on such a purpose?

In the absence of attention to these questions, too much of what we do proceeds based on flawed assumptions. As just one example, does our hybrid public/private system save money? After all, the *average* per-student recurrent funding from governments is highest for public schools. But these schools enrol the highest cost students, hence average comparisons are misleading. If anyone 'saves' it is the state governments: having more private schools creates a long-term saving for state treasuries - because the Commonwealth and parents pay to run them. In effect, the level of government which must provide public schools has an incentive not to do so. This perverse system endures because no one is checking.

### **Clear set of system goals is essential**

In addition, and alongside learning purposes (the Mparntwe Education Declaration), we need a clear set of system goals including equity, diversity and effectiveness of public resources.

These goals are critical for measurement and should be included in any future Commonwealth and State/ Territory government agreements.

With clear and transparent purposes, monitoring, accountability and reporting on progress will be possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan & L Sibieta, 'A comparison of private schooling in the United Kingdom and Australia', *The Australian Economic Review*, vol. 44, no. 3, September 2011, pp. 295–307.

## **Recommendation 2:**

### **Reviewing the remits of existing agencies, especially ACARA and AERO with the consideration of establishing a separate independent body to focus and report on equity in schooling, including social segregation and its impact on student outcomes.**

ALL strongly supports the attention the Consultation Paper has given to possible changes in what education data is collected and/or how it is reported. The panel clearly recognises the importance of reporting on the things that matter, along with how the impacts of policy changes on student outcomes can be identified, shared, and incorporated into future policy reform processes.

This process needs to be as transparent as possible.

For that reason, ALL supports the suggestion that *MySchool* should report on each school's SRS funding entitlement against its actual funding. At the same time ALL cautions against assumptions that there is, or can be, a simple linear relationship between funding inputs and student outcomes.

In the absence of such a relationship, policy makers further assume that the problem solely lies in how the money is spent – and the sole solution is to mandate that funding be equitably distributed and allocated to proven strategies and resources.

Another resource going to schools - the resource of engaged, aspirant and achieving students - is inequitably distributed. A dominant feature of competition between schools is their unequal efforts to acquire such students, contributing to the concentrated disadvantage revealed on page 15 of the Consultation Paper. At very little expense, some schools can dramatically improve student outcomes, but at the expense of other schools.

Transparency requires that all resources going into schools be measured and reported.

The reporting is critical. The Consultation Paper's reference to the *MySchool* website is particularly relevant, including in the way in which it has "enabled the community to see NAPLAN results and other information at the school level" (p.37). The Consultation Paper notes how this has generated a deeper understanding of how levels of socio-economic advantage, and other factors at the school level, impact on outcomes.

But extending this deeper understanding beyond the school level is not achievable within the current remits of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) or the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO).

The role of ACARA is effectively currently limited to providing the data. ACARA's National Report on Schooling in Australia includes progress on key performance measures, yet it is unaccompanied by any report on the progress on stated goals expressed by education ministers and/or which become part of the NSRA. *My School* potentially reveals much more about achievement and equity, including how these change over time and from place to place. We recommend that this valuable data be used to analyse the degree of social segregation between Australian schools so that this critical ingredient of our system can be monitored and reported.

If ACARA cannot be repurposed to do this work, consideration should be given to establishing a separate independent body to focus and report on equity in schooling, including social segregation and its impact on student outcomes, as well as the efficacy of current arrangements governing the funding of schools.

In a similar way the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has a far too limited scope and reach. The role of AERO is to assess what works in schools. It should also act as a filter for any proposals or policies, including from governments, which may impact on school achievement. In the context of school reform, there is a clear need to subject various claims and counter claims to rigorous and transparent fact-checking? This is critical, given that the debate around school reform seems excessively driven by urges to transplant or scale up high-profile examples of reform that seem to work, regardless of the context and the long-term efficacy of the reform.

As a minimum, we **recommend** that the Review Panel considers the role of AERO in this current review.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Establishing a common framework for all Australian schools and exploring and assessing common framework models in other countries**

The above recommendations are made in the spirit of improving the status quo.

However, ALL argues that the status quo is no longer fit for purpose if we are to enable every child to thrive. Robust shift requires robust ideas and solutions. In the absence of a clear purpose and thorough evaluation of what we have, Australia's school framework drifts from crisis to crisis. Previous and enduring assumptions limit and distort the purpose of successive reviews and limit the potential effectiveness of the NSRA itself.

The most significant assumption is that our framework of schools has served us well in the past and will continue to do so – despite clear evidence, often set aside by reformers, that it is continuing to drive enrolment segregation with all its impacts on overall student achievement.

The Consultation Paper tries to deal with this: “evidence needs to include a solid understanding of what works in successful education systems” and “education should ... achieve equity across all schools, recognising the needs of all students”. (1.4)

However, policies and practices at the system/framework level are still not on many agendas for reform. The Consultation Paper has warned about additional forms of disadvantage through the design of the education system. But little to no consideration is given to who is responsible for investigating and monitoring the architecture of the whole system.

This won't happen until and unless the NSRA includes attention to reforming the framework of Australian schools among its priorities.

To this end ALL strongly **recommends** that ‘Evaluating and reforming the architecture of Australia's school system’ be developed as a National Policy Initiative in Schedule B of the NSRA and foreshadowed in Part 3 (Reform Activity) of the 2024 agreement. This will provide the required impetus for investigation of the wider issues which have impacted on school and school system achievement.

While subsequent findings and recommendations might take many forms, ALL believes that Australia should work towards establishing a common framework of responsibilities and obligations should apply equally to all publicly funded schools guaranteeing that:

- all schools that receive public funding, whether they're in the government or non-government sector, are free to the user and prohibited from charging fees,
- all schools that receive public funding are open to children of all abilities, and prohibited from excluding children based on entrance tests and other similar discriminators; non-government schools could continue to apply enrolment and other policies necessary to promote their specific religious or educational ethos,
- non-government schools that accept these conditions are fully publicly funded to meet recurrent and capital costs on the same needs-basis as government schools,
- non-government schools that continue to charge fees or reject inclusive enrolment obligations would no longer receive any public funding.

The attraction of such a framework lies in the way it could reduce the segregation that is a blight on our school system, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to thrive in more socio-economically mixed schools.

ALL believes this is an essential step to turning Australia's educational performance around and closing the unacceptable gaps between students from different backgrounds. Crucially, a common framework will also enhance social cohesion and strengthen our shared commitment to each other.

It is important to note that there are two major concerning features of Australia's hybrid public/private framework of schools, firstly that it is an anomaly on a global scale and secondly that its schools underperform when compared with those in many similar countries.

This reality should raise interest in how other systems are structured and perform, especially those built around a common framework which supports a diversity of schools, and choice between them.

While many countries have such a framework Canada is an interesting comparison, given that Canada and Australia are broadly similar in demographic terms. Canada's framework of free, comprehensive schools produces much better outcomes than Australia's unlevel playing field, including in every round of PISA since the test's inception at the start of this century. A PISA student questionnaire also shows that disadvantaged Canadian children are more likely than their Australian counterparts to feel they belong at school. And the expectations gap between advantaged and disadvantaged high performers is considerably smaller in Canada than it is in Australia.

## Conclusion

We understand that the Review's terms of reference and timeline will limit the attention which can be given to reaching solutions. However, we **recommend** to the Panel that urgent attention be given to ways in which the design of the education system compounds disadvantage and undermines the efficacy of both existing and any proposed reform. Recommendations about how this can be done are summarised at the beginning of this submission.

Given the limitations of time and the specific purposes of this review, ALL applauds the work of the Panel to date. Much of what we propose are matters which must be addressed if we are to achieve longer term change. They won't go away. Radical reform requires radical ideas, and the courage to change. The structure of the NSRA itself should not be exempt. It needs to acknowledge multiple impacts on student outcomes, including the increasing segregation of students, and plan longer-term changes to minimise and reverse decade-long regressive trends.

We need a clear rationale and purpose for our framework of schools before establishing sustainable reform and accountability all levels.

The process of reform should still focus on schools **and** be widened to embrace framework policy and decision making.

### About Australian Learning Lecture

The Australian Learning Lecture is a ten-year initiative by Koshland Education Innovation designed to bring big ideas and new approaches in education to national attention. ALL acts as a hub and a catalyst, working with the world's leading knowledge shapers to drive impact in key areas of need for change. It draws on the input of multiple voices and stakeholders to strengthen the importance of learning for all Australians. ALL is not politically or commercially aligned.

In keeping with ALL's interests in equity, passion for deep learning and structural change, ALL published in early 2023 *Choice and Fairness: a common framework for all Australian schools*. Previous publications are *Beyond ATAR*, which calls for a Learner Profile for all students (a recommendation taken up by the Shergold Report) and *The Future School*, based on a global scan of schools meeting the challenge of our changing times.