

Australian Schools Plus

Submission to:

Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System

August 2023

Contacts

[Redacted contact information]

[Redacted contact information]

[Redacted contact information]

INTRODUCTION

Australian Schools Plus welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the important review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System and the new National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA).

[Australian Schools Plus](#) (Schools Plus) is a national not for profit established in 2014 to help close the education divide by enabling opportunities for *all* students to reach their potential despite their geography or postcode. We do this by investing in school communities where disadvantage exists, with funding and capacity-building support, tailored to address specific needs.

Our organisation

Schools Plus was established as a result of a key recommendation within the first 'Review of Funding for Schooling' (2011), led by David Gonski, which called for the establishment of a national organisation to break down the barriers that prevented disadvantaged schools from accessing philanthropic support.

We partner with a range of philanthropic organisations to invest in school communities with funding and capacity-building support.

Since our inception, we have raised \$60 million and benefitted over **500,000 students** and **40,000 teachers** in **1400 schools** across Australia.

Our work

Each year we receive 400-500 applications from schools in disadvantaged communities, seeking support to address an identified need and in doing so empower children and young people, regardless of their background, to be engaged and successful learners and to thrive in a dynamic workplace and society.

These school-led interventions largely focus on strengthening student outcomes in three areas:

- Academic Achievement - literacy, numeracy and STEM,
- Wellbeing – allowing for emotional and cognitive engagement in learning, and
- Dispositions such as interest and motivation, flexible mindset and agency for lifelong learning.

Our support focuses on building capacity within the schools predominantly in three domains: teaching and learning practice development, school leadership and family and community partnerships. It includes co-design of programs, coaching, program management and project evaluation. We also have a strong commitment to scaling our work across communities where challenges are similar; and we foster a community of practice through knowledge sharing across teacher networks.

Our commitment and contribution to the education sector

Given our bespoke approach to supporting schools, Schools Plus is uniquely placed to shine a spotlight on what is happening at an individual school level. However, it is the amalgamation of the data gathered from interrogating practice and building evidence from these context-led initiatives that can **inform and promote continual system-level change**.

We are committed to providing **equity in educational opportunities and outcomes**.

With nearly 10 years' experience in place-based community development, Schools Plus has made a significant contribution to enhancing educational outcomes for all Australian children. Our regular consultation and engagement with school communities enables us to have a real time and comprehensive **understanding of education opportunities and challenges in less advantaged communities** and means that we are **well-placed as an education partner** to play an **active role in future directions**.

Included in this report are many examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus. They are intended to highlight specific characteristics which have resulted in positive student and capacity building outcomes and may be replicable in different contexts, rather than a detailed capture of the whole project.

Schools Plus would welcome the opportunity to provide further information if required.

PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES

It is essential all children and young people can build knowledge, skills and understandings in literacy, numeracy, STEM and future-focused skills, and cultural understandings. Integral to this is supporting students to develop positive wellbeing and learning behaviours to equip them to be lifelong learners and adapt to emerging opportunities in what is an ever-changing social, cultural and environmental world.

We believe the following are important considerations for improving student outcomes:

- **Student-focused and holistic teaching and learning**
- **Literacy – a foundational life skill**
- **Digital and future-focused skills**
- **Seamless school transitions**
- **Family and community engagement**

1. Student-focused and holistic teaching and learning

A holistic and student-focused education is important for all young people to reach their potential. This requires teaching and learning to focus on both the academic and emotional needs of a child and to provide **relevant and authentic learning** opportunities which allow each child to feel a sense of belonging, interest and are cognitively engaged. Our experience suggests for this to be successful schools need to be **well led, innovative and flexible** in delivery of learning, gain **regular professional learning**, and where appropriate, **engage family and community**.

Examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Relevant and authentic learning.** A collaboration of schools, led by [REDACTED] High School (SA), introduced a program designed to develop students' 21st century skills. Students identified local problems, planned, ideated and prototyped solutions and presented them to community representatives, including local councillors, business leaders and their federal MP. The program was underpinned by professional development, partnerships with industry and local businesses and teaching which integrated design thinking and real-world problem-solving. The result was increased student 21st century outcomes, including a transfer of knowledge and skills from primary to secondary school.
- **Engage community:** The *Two-Way Science* [REDACTED] project sees locally relevant topics e.g. water, animals, plants, weather explored through [REDACTED] on-country activities connected to the Australian curriculum. The 10 participating APY Lands schools have seen increased student engagement, wellbeing through connection to culture, and improved school engagement with the Anangu community. Teachers also report that linking on-country learning with the Australian Curriculum has helped improve their teaching practice in other learning areas.

2. Literacy - a foundational life skill

A strong focus on literacy and supporting their development throughout all stages – including key transition points - of schooling is critical. This has been a perennial need communicated by schools and demonstrated in 2022 where 20% of projects supported by Schools Plus focused on addressing learning gaps in literacy including oral literacy, reading and/or writing, as well as increasing student enjoyment, confidence, and engagement in literacy learning.

Our experience shows **setting high expectations** for all students, **targeted interventions**, **engagement of expert services** and better **equipping teachers** at all levels with the knowledge and skills to identify, monitor and address literacy gaps can make a difference.

Examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Targeted interventions.** ██████████ Primary School (SA) implemented personalised one-on-one teaching and learning, which was informed by student language testing and supported by expert teaching and allied health providers. Additional capability and capacity were developed by creating a Literacy Improvement Team by upskilling existing teachers, employing a reading coach and a speech pathologist. A book club where parents could access information on how best to support their child was also established to support family engagement.
- **Engagement of expert services.** ██████████ Primary School (Tas) established an onsite speech pathology service to provide kindergarten and pre-primary students with weekly access to speech pathology services, as well as provide support to teachers and parents to provide education in speech, language and early literacy development.

3. Digital and future-focused skills

A focus on **digital and future-focused skills** is a priority. In 2023, 23% of projects supported by Schools Plus are focused on STEAM and developing students' digital literacy and future-ready thinking skills and competencies.

Through our work, we see this need magnified for our most vulnerable students who for socio economic reasons may not have access to technology or for various extrinsic and intrinsic reasons may not exhibit the same level of self-belief, motivation to learn and ability to navigate change. By focusing on these areas, we can help promote equity and bridge the learning divide of the negative effects of curbed aspirations and impact of disadvantage.

Our experience shows, increased **access to technology, digital tools, resources and programs**, **upskilling teachers**, delivery of **real-world learning opportunities**, **STEM programs for under-represented cohorts** and **opportunities for industry, community and academic partnerships** are important factors in achieving these outcomes.

Examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Access to technologies.** ██████████ Primary School (TAS) established a space for students to engage and experiment with 3D printers, robots and cameras. This resulted in 100% of students using Makerspace during school, 45% involved in extra curricula activities, increased attendance, decreased behavioural issues and strengthened community partnerships.
- **Creation of relevant, real-world learning:** which incorporate opportunities to develop creativity, collaboration, design-thinking and problem-solving skills. The Virtual STEM Academy (VSA), operating across three Australian states (QLD, NSW, NT), provides the opportunity for like-minded students to access highly experienced and talented STEM teachers and experts, and to collaborate online and solve real world problems. The VSA especially aims to inspire young people in rural and remote settings, young women, and those from less advantaged contexts.

4. Seamless school transitions

Transitions into, through and out of formal education must provide a seamless learning experience. In particular, we see there is a need to strengthen approaches to transitions from early childhood to school, noting children facing disadvantage are twice as likely to be unprepared for school (AEDC 2021 National Report), and transitions to post school options including tertiary study or the workplace.

Transition from early childhood to school

Our experience suggests there needs to be more timely and effective **collaboration between school and early years services**, and a multi- faceted approach to meeting student needs. This would be strengthened with an **agreed system-level approach** to identifying and responding to learning gaps supported by access to **'real time' and integrated data**, and **well-resourced and accessible support**, particularly for priority groups.

An example of an effective intervention supported by Schools Plus is:

- **School-based Transition Support Teacher.** The *'Strong start, successful learners'* program implemented by the ██████████ of Schools (NSW) engaged an early years transition support teacher to plan, build strong relationships with early childhood care services and families to ensure children are ready for school – and schools are ready for the children. The result was that children's specific needs were identified, received early education services and their readiness for school maximised.

Transition post school

Our experience shows there needs to be a variety of learning opportunities to support students to effectively transition from school. This includes **elevating employability skills** and within the curriculum, **upskilling teachers**, and **embedding relevant curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting**.

An example of an effective intervention supported by Schools Plus is:

- **Elevating employability skills:** [REDACTED] High School (QLD) developed and implemented a program to support students to develop critical skills required for work including collaboration, communication, creativity, leadership, initiative, enterprise, self-management, problem-solving and critical thinking. This has been coupled with a micro-credentialing system and digital badges which allow students to demonstrate skills and gain recognition for them from training agencies and businesses. The impact is more students are signing up to full-time school-based apprenticeships and vocational modules while still at school and transitioning into employment.

5. Family and community engagement

Research and practical experience show family engagement is a strong predictor of children's educational outcomes, with improvement in student outcomes 10 times more likely in schools with strong family engagement (Winthrop. R et al, 2021). The challenge – and the opportunity - is there is no one-size-fits-all approach for a school to adopt a culture of parent and family engagement. Each school represents a unique community, setting and context, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. (ARACY 2020)

School-community partnerships such as with local businesses, community organisations, universities and training institutions can also positively impact student outcomes by increasing access to learning opportunities, improving attendance and retention rates of children at school.

To have the greatest impact, schools must **understand their community, introduce relevant engagement strategies and activities, including external services, and provide resources and support for staff** (educators and others) to develop skills to **build and sustain family engagement** and **effectively collaborate with community members** to improve learning outcomes.

Examples of school-based interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Community collaboration.** At [REDACTED] School (QLD), [REDACTED] Elders co-designed a program to bring the local language, [REDACTED], to the school and help close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance. The result has been higher student engagement, 17% increase in enrolments and writing skills that are significantly ahead of the region's average. Community engagement in the language has also increased through the project app.
- **Understanding the school community.** At [REDACTED] Public School (NSW) 98% of students have English as an additional language. In response, written Kindergarten to Year 6 student reports were replaced with half-hour, three-way Learning Conversations involving the student, teacher, family and often interpreters. This program boosted the effectiveness of communication and has driven average family attendance at school events per semester to 97%.
- **External services for family:** A collaboration of three primary schools in Mt Gambier, (SA) introduced the Family-School Partnerships for Learning program to provide proactive social work services for identified parents/carers of highly disengaged students and nurture a shared responsibility for their learning. Social workers partnered with site-based wellbeing leaders to connect parents/carers with personalised interventions focused on improving their child's attendance, wellbeing and learning outcomes.

PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: IMPROVING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

There is strong evidence to suggest students with wellbeing challenges have difficulty in engaging at school and in learning. These challenges are more pronounced for some student cohorts, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in remote areas, and students from disadvantaged areas impacted by socioeconomic pressures, family trauma or educational inequality. Research supports students' sense of safety and belonging as precursors to a student's ability to emotionally and cognitively engage in learning.

As a result of our experience, where the demand from schools for support for wellbeing initiatives has been consistently high over multiple years, we believe the following are important considerations to effectively addressing student wellbeing outcomes:

- **Recognising wellbeing as an integral part of the curriculum**
- **Supporting student wellbeing requires specific knowledge and skills**
- **Focusing on engagement to improve attendance.**

1. Recognising wellbeing as an integral part of the curriculum

In 2023, 29% of projects supported by Schools Plus will focus on improving student wellbeing outcomes such as developing personal and social competencies to build positive and constructive relationships, to self-regulate and behave appropriately in different settings and in turn be able to engage effectively in learning. These competencies are particularly critical for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who we know are twice as likely to experience poor mental wellbeing and, by Year 3, may be nine months behind their peers.

Our experience indicates the following elements can contribute to positive change: **strong school leadership, whole of school approach, increased and assured resourcing, innovative solutions with a preventative rather than punitive mindset and collaboration with community.**

Examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Whole-school approach.** At [REDACTED] Public School (NSW), staff completed professional development in trauma informed practices, a community liaison officer was engaged, information packages were disseminated in the community and mindfulness sessions were introduced for students. As a result, students strengthened their resilience, ability to manage daily challenges and to regulate their emotions. There was also a decline in negative behaviours, fewer suspensions, and improved engagement in learning.
- **Innovative solutions:** [REDACTED] Primary School (SA) created a safe playtime space where children could learn together and build social, teamwork and problem-solving skills. The intervention resulted in less disruptions and improved student engagement in class.

2. Supporting student wellbeing requires specific knowledge and skills

Of the wellbeing projects supported by Schools Plus in 2022, 58% had a focus on **building capability of teaching staff through professional development**. This was particularly evident in rural and remote areas where 24% of projects focused on student wellbeing, and of those, 56% focused on building teaching and learning capability and capacity. In addition to professional development, **school-based workers** such as Engagement Officers or Family/Community Liaison Officers are engaged to provide **additional capacity and capability** within a school community.

More broadly, **prioritising increased access to professional mental health and wellbeing services** for young people is critical. This is particularly evident in rural and remote areas where the provision of mental health care services reduces with distance from major cities. For example in [2019-20](#), overall provision of mental health care services was 2.7 times less in remote areas and 5.6 times less in very remote areas. A more integrated approach, particular with the health and education sectors, would contribute positively to this challenge.

An example of a school-led intervention supported by Schools Plus is:

- **Access to professional health services.** As part of its *School as a Community Hub* initiative, ██████████ College (SA) established a partnership with a local medical practitioner to provide services to students on campus on a regular basis. Students missed less time attending appointments and were able to better focus on learning. The broader program includes active partnership with local providers, organisations, workplaces and volunteers with a particular commitment to developing long-term sustainable improvements in mental health.

3. Focusing on engagement to improve attendance

Many factors contribute to disengagement and non-attendance. Individually, a young person's attitudes and motivations, academic self-concept and self-esteem, and/or mental and/or physical health come into play. Similarly, family factors such as socioeconomic background, parents' attitudes toward school, cultural backgrounds, geolocation and mobility; and school-related factors such as a sense of belonging and connectedness with peers or teachers, not feeling safe at school or being bullied may have an impact. What we know is that these are particularly heightened for young people experiencing disadvantage and will impact their achievement.

Our experience indicates that **engaging learning opportunities**, including those which see community partners and **tailored, dedicated support** for at-risk students can enhance student engagement.

Examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Engaging learning opportunities.** There are many examples where learning opportunities involving community members and businesses involved as program partners providing mentoring programs and work placements, or opportunities for students to volunteer in projects such as Landcare, community gardens and/or aged care homes. Programs resulted in increased student interest and motivation, confidence, communication skills and sense of belonging.

- **Tailored, dedicated support.** To improve engagement of specific cohorts of at-risk students, [REDACTED] Public School (NSW) engaged skilled education engagement workers to work with students to develop individual attendance and learning plans to address each child's attendance and learning gaps. Foundational to this were strong levels of relational trust between the worker and students.

PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: OUR CURRENT AND FUTURE TEACHERS

In 2022, Schools Plus partnered with over 7,700 teachers and school leaders in 358 schools where children and young people's learning is often negatively impacted by disadvantage. To shift this pattern and ensure every child is able to reach their potential, it is critical we **attract, retain and recognise** quality teachers and school leaders.

1. Retain and Support

Numerous factors can contribute to the low retention of teachers and school leaders both within the teaching profession and specific school communities, particularly in remote and complex contexts. Through our work, we have observed the following as positive contributors to teachers' satisfaction and sense of accomplishment in bringing about change for students.

- A shared – school and community - vision and responsibility for change.
- Opportunities for teacher agency and autonomy in identifying and meeting learning needs.
- Ongoing staff professional development and support, including early career teacher support.
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities and opportunity to focus on core business of teaching.
- Opportunities for collaboration with community with a shared commitment to meet the learning needs of students.

Examples of school-led interventions supported by Schools Plus include:

- **Creating a climate for shared responsibility and collaboration:** At [REDACTED] College (VIC) extremely low staff morale and high turnover was addressed by adopting a shared responsibility and empowering teachers to drive improvement in learning. It resulted in an improved culture of collaboration, increased trust amongst staff, and shared knowledge both within and beyond the school.
- **Early career teacher support.** [REDACTED] High School (QLD) hosts up to 500 pre-service teachers each year. To support their learning, they have developed a pre-service teacher education program including Professional Learning Communities of Practice, designed with Griffith University, to provide research-based learning and training, a Focus Team of 25 leading teachers who conduct classroom observations and coach staff, and the '[REDACTED] Institute of Teacher Development' – an online community of practice providing targeted support and professional learning, designed in consultation with leading academics from Australian universities, education organisations and Harvard University. The result is well-supported pre-service teachers.

2. Recognise

Since 2017, Schools Plus has partnered with the Commonwealth Bank and our Pioneers in Philanthropy (a group of Australian business leaders and philanthropists who have come together to support disadvantaged teachers and the teachers who work in them) to raise the profile and recognise the significant contribution of teachers and school leaders through the annual Commonwealth Bank Teaching Awards.

- The Awards recognise recipients as members of the teaching profession, showcasing impactful practice and celebrating school-led innovation and creativity in tackling complex student needs. The recipients have the opportunity to continue their professional growth as education leaders - learning from and with others across national and international networks. It provides a platform to promote teaching as a profession of choice.
- Award recipients become members of the Schools Plus Teaching Fellow alumni – currently a coalition of 72 exemplary educators. The alumni, and Schools Plus, would welcome opportunities to contribute professional perspectives and input to national conversations and debates.

PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: COLLECTING DATA TO INFORM DECISION MAKING AND BOOST STUDENT OUTCOMES

We believe there are two major opportunities regarding data to inform decision-making:

- **Strengthen school leaders' and teachers' capabilities to use data to improve outcomes.**
- **A more joined-up systems response, which provides ways for both schools and education not-for-profit organisations to share their insights with systems.**

1. Strengthen the capability of schools to use data to inform decisions.

Through our work, we have identified significant challenges in school leaders and teachers in being able to collect, analyse and interpret data. This has led us to create a measurement and evaluation framework which guides them through the process of linking activities to outcomes and encourages the schools to think about how they will effectively measure the change they wish to see. Our leadership coaches support each school team to develop their capabilities in this area, which helps them to determine the impact of their work.

- Greater investment both in data literacy in initial teacher training and greater access to quality ongoing professional development offered to all teachers would be welcomed. This would support teachers to make better decisions at a classroom and school level.
- In addition, signposting to schools what measurement tools are already available and how to use them would be beneficial. This would stop schools reinventing the wheel and lead to more effective data collection.
- We have worked closely with the Australian Evaluation and Research Organisation and shared its resources with schools, many of which were not familiar with AERO. Greater promotion of AERO's function and resources at a state-by-state level would ensure more schools access this support (for e.g. we have seen several 'super users' who are advocates for the AERO resources).

2. Better provisions for ways of two-way sharing of insights with systems and across agencies, to inform decision-making

We would welcome the opportunity to share the data and insights collected by Schools Plus to help inform policy design and implementation at a system level. Provisions for more effective ways of sharing would ensure that organisations like ours can share school data and organisational insights to effectively contribute to informing and improving opportunities in practice and policy to further improve student outcomes – something we are all working towards.

- Together with other not for profit organisations, we see the value in having mechanisms for sharing of data and insights between departments and agencies, including non-government organisations and ‘from the ground up’. This would be best led at a system level, with other key stakeholders participating in two-way sharing.
- In addition, having more standardised ways of measuring progress and outcomes which are beyond NAPLAN, to be used by schools, departments, agencies and not for profit organisations, would a) recognise the importance of the work schools do to change wellbeing and other outcomes in addition to literacy and numeracy, and b) allow us to share data together more easily, to inform decision-making.

PRIORITY AREA FOR REFORM: FUNDING

Schools Plus was founded following a recommendation in the first Gonski review, which identified a need for philanthropic funding of schools, to help close the education gap caused by disadvantage.

Schools tell us that the funding they receive through Schools Plus is perceived differently to the government funding received. The reasons cited include:

- The ability to target the funding to where it’s needed most (specific cohorts)
- More flexibility in decision-making about where to allocate the funds to best effect
- More freedom to try a new or more innovative approach (still informed by evidence) to tackling the issues arising from disadvantage based on their unique school context.

We recommend a balanced approach be taken to ensure that whilst an evidence-informed approach is critical and there has to be accountability, that there is also flexibility based on the unique school context.

REFERENCES

- Barker, B. and Harris, D., 2020. Parent and family engagement: An implementation guide for school communities. *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth*.
- Commonwealth of Australia, 2021. Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031.
- Winthrop, R., Barton, A., Ershadi, M. and Ziegler, L., 2021. Collaborating to transform and improve education systems: A playbook for family-school engagement.
- [Australian Early Development Census, 2021 National Report](#)
- [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization](#) (UNESCO)