

2 August 2023

Submission: Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System: Aug 2023

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, which is part of the federal government’s National School Reform Agreement.

The review constitutes an important step to ensure Australia provides an equitable and excellent education system to every child and young person.

The submission is focused on the question: **What targets and reforms should be included in the next NSRA to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a particular focus on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English?**

Contribution to the submission is informed by the [‘Education Inequity’ reports](#), led by Meera Varadharajan at the Centre for Social Impact, University of New South Wales.

Problem and Background

While Australia prides itself as being the land of the ‘fair go’, Australia’s education system from early childhood learning to post-secondary education and beyond is far from equitable. There is a widening performance gap in NAPLAN scores between students from socio-economic and high socio-economic backgrounds, and the gap widens significantly as students’ progress through school years. Educational disparity have grown in the last two decades despite multiple state and federal reviews, senate inquiries and reforms. Almost every review or inquiry has highlighted the problems faced by students and the gaps in academic performance. However, education policies and practices have made little progress in improving the inequity gap.

Evidence shows there are consistent, often overlapping, demographic groups who consistently bear the brunt of education inequity. They include students:

- » From a low socio-economic or socio-educational household
- » From an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background
- » With a disability
- » Who are refugees or migrants from a non-English speaking background
- » Who live in a rural, regional or remote area.

In our [report](#), we identified eleven key drivers that cause education inequity.

KEY DRIVERS OUTSIDE EDUCATION SETTINGS	KEY DRIVERS INSIDE EDUCATION SETTINGS
1. Poverty, resources and home environment	6. Standardised testing
2. Lack of accessible, responsive and affordable early childhood education and care	7. One-size-fits-all curriculum
3. Disconnection between education settings, home and community	8. Teaching and staffing issues
4. Systems and structures – segregation and funding models	9. Bullying, discrimination and social isolation
5. Parent and family engagement	10. Absence of a whole of school approach underpinned by resources and infrastructure
	11. Absence of student voice and agency

In addition, students in vulnerable contexts are disenfranchised by the use of commonly used indicators that are used to measure progress in educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes and demonstrate the current weight of inequity in Australia. Non-existent data for certain groups further highlight structural problems that steepen inequity.

How can we address education inequity?

Education inequity is a complex issue requiring complex solutions. Education inequity is not a standalone issue and is not confined to just schools or education institutions. It is linked to other societal issues, such as poverty and homelessness, and is affected by the wider Australian policy in a resource-constrained context.

There are programs and initiatives that have been implemented in schools and in the community that provide solutions to close the equity gap. Examining programs and initiative that have shown success or promise enables us to understand what works well and what are the key factors for success. This then provides opportunities to replicate, scale, or adapt them in other schools and locations.

We conducted a systematic review of 45 **evidence-based programs and culturally inclusive studies** based in Australia. Programs focused on achieving educational and non-educational outcomes for young people belonging to the five target groups. Findings from the review were synthesised to come with sixteen **levers of change**. Drivers and associated levers of change can be found [here](#).

What policies and reforms do we need?

Recognising the education inequity is not a siloed issue, different stakeholder groups must come together to play a role in bringing about reforms to address inequity.

In our [report](#), we came up with 22 recommendations that can be actioned by key stakeholder groups. Recommendations were developed by synthesising key messages derived from the programs and studies examined, and by drawing on best practice in research and evaluation. Whilst these recommendations are by means comprehensive, **they can form the basis of the policies and reforms that needs to happen to build a fair and equitable education system**. We recognise that targeted and sustainable investment in programs and people is essential to implement the recommendations.

Recommendations for governments and organisations supporting the work of education

1. Fund wrap-around initiatives that focus on early childhood service coordination, community embeddedness, parental involvement and service
2. Resolve or remove arbitrary administrative boundaries and improve infrastructure and efficiency in remote geographic sites to establish and implement initiatives
3. Recognise transition to school as a critically important educational phase and provide structured, targeted and ongoing funding to enable effective locally driven transition programs
4. Provide greater individualised support for at-risk special needs students in early years of education
5. Expand or create programs to benefit families and children who are highly disadvantaged on a number of dimensions
6. Support, reinforce and incentivise the potential of partnerships between schools, universities and communities for creating linkages and diverse pathways to education and employment in local and outer regions
7. Invest in engagement programs that has successfully demonstrated quantifiable and non-quantifiable outcomes and socio-economic benefits in order to reach more students in need
8. Invest in flexible education model options that embed non-ATAR based pathways of learning to capture general capability skills and competencies acquired in outside education settings

Recommendations for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service providers

9. Replicate programs that lead towards successful transition, adopting a holistic approach framed around five elements: ready school; ready child, ready families, ready community and ready early childhood services
10. Increase access to more inclusive preschool settings, recognising they are one type of useful early intervention among other services
11. Explicitly acknowledge the limitations of western definitions of 'school readiness' in transition programs

Recommendations for community stakeholders and organisations working with education providers

12. Develop cultural competence training for schools and service organisations on how to work and engage with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and families, and communities and students from non-English speaking backgrounds

Recommendations for school leaders and educators

13. Improve evidence base to address the gaps in high-quality longitudinal data and inconsistent approaches to program evaluation and by incorporating the voices of students and families in regular assessment and evaluation practices
14. Establish viable partnership models that effectively leverage community members' experience and knowledge to implement whole-of school strategies that support students towards purposeful and inclusive learning
15. Systematically implement early intervention tools to address learning difficulties in a timely manner

Recommendations for all stakeholders

16. Develop and implement system level initiatives: school-based, school-linked, community-based or a combination of these, that work in partnership with external agencies to improve the range of extended services to students, schools, families and local community
17. Invest in processes and training to ensure schools have culturally appropriate support systems in place to welcome and enrol students from culturally diverse backgrounds

Recommendations for school leaders and educators and community stakeholders and organisations working with education providers

18. Promote and enhance the benefits of evidence-based long term mentoring programs across large communities in Australia
19. Create opportunities for external program facilitators and school staff to collaborate, acknowledging their complementary strengths in relation to building outcomes for students
20. Replicate or transfer successful partnership models in Indigenous education using a cautious approach to similar school contexts
21. Adapt changes in curriculum to support the multiplicity of social and cultural identities so that all students are balanced in both worlds, strong in both their Western knowledge and English and their Indigenous identity, cultural knowledge and language
22. Develop culturally relevant pedagogic and curriculum programs that seek to impact more directly on learning outcomes

To summarise

- **Capture learnings gained outside school** in a systematic and formal manner under the existing sets of general capability skills within the curriculum.
- **Embed flexible frameworks and non-traditional education models** as potential alternative ways for valuing outside school experiences and recognising corresponding outcomes outside the curriculum.
- Take steps to **actively engage and encourage students** to be part of the collection and documentation of relevant experiences and associated outcomes.
- Develop a robust **'evidence-based ecosystem'** be developed to generate continuous and sustained improvement in schools, systems, sectors and policy, and a consistent and cautious approach be adopted with respect to culturally appropriate program evaluation among First Nations students.
- **Adapt or scale successful or promising initiatives and programs** to increase reach among different community settings.

To achieve equitable and excellent education, Australia must tackle inequity as a shared responsibility.

Thank you again for providing the opportunity to write a submission.

Your sincerely,

Meera

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