

Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System

South Australian Government submission to the Expert Panel – August 2023

The South Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to give input to the Expert Panel as it conducts its review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System, which will inform the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

The NSRA is the key agreement setting the national reform direction for schooling in Australia. It operates in a complex environment – schooling in Australia is not only state based, but also sector based. It is important this complexity, and the associated challenges and opportunities, are recognised in the next agreement. It is also important that the next agreement provides flexibility for reforms to be progressed in a way that is appropriate for the local context.

The South Australian Government has recently released its [Strategy for Public Education](#), which sets out a clear purpose statement for public education. The strategy was developed in partnership with preschoolers and school students, staff, families, the community and employers, as well as local, national and international experts.

The strategy outlines four areas of impact that will be prioritised and resourced in the South Australian public school system to deliver on this purpose:

- **Wellbeing:** this includes the domains belonging and safety, resilience and persistence, and cognitive engagement.
- **Equity and excellence:** this includes the domains knowledge, skills, competencies and capabilities, Aboriginal learners, inclusion, and breaking the link between background and excellence.
- **Learner agency:** this includes the domains voice to agency, partners in learning and discernment and judgement.
- **Effective learners:** this includes the domains of curiosity, creativity, meaning making, strategic awareness and metacognition and self regulation.

Importantly, while excellence includes striving for high standards in foundational capabilities such as literacy, numeracy and digital, the strategy recognises the broader range of capabilities and skills students need to be successful in life, and through which students can demonstrate excellence.

These areas of impact demonstrate our commitment to reform in many of the areas being considered by the Expert Panel. Commitment to national reform in one or more of these areas provides an opportunity to overcome issues of scale and test, evaluate and adapt approaches in ways that account for local context, and to share learning across jurisdictions.

The South Australian Government offers the following additional feedback on specific areas of the Expert Panel's investigations.



Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

Concentration of disadvantage

Both international and local research has shown a strong link between schools' socioeconomic profile and students' performance.

In South Australia, the government school sector has the highest proportion of students from priority equity cohorts (ie students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds). In 2022, 66% of low SES students, 67% of students with disability, 85% of First Nations Students, and 74% of regional, rural and remote students were educated in government schools. Similar trends are reflected nationally, noting government schools have a legislative responsibility for educating all students irrespective of background or circumstance.

In the context of creating a better and fairer education system, consideration needs to be given to the factors which are leading to this concentration of disadvantage in Australian government schools, how they have evolved over time, what they mean for teaching and learning in local contexts, and how they can be addressed to support more equitable education outcomes. Commissioning a review of all of these issues could be considered as part of the next agreement. This work could include a consideration of whether Australia's experience is similar or different to that of other international jurisdictions, and the ways in which those jurisdictions have addressed this issue.

As well as understanding the causes of and potential interventions to address concentration of disadvantage, schools need support in managing its effects: namely, a high level of complexity in classrooms. The process for identifying and developing supports must start from the premise that each school community, and each learner, is different. If addressing the issue of complexity is to be a reform priority, there must be recognition of the need for jurisdictions, sectors and schools to have flexibility in the way in which the issue is to be addressed, including space to adapt and innovate. Critical to this will be a commitment to defining excellence and success in schooling more broadly while continuing to maintain our collective expectation for high standards in literacy, numeracy and digital.

This principle is relevant for all components of the panel's report.

Quality teaching and curriculum resources

In the context of state and sector based schooling systems, implementation of the Australian Curriculum is the responsibility of state and territory governments and the non government sector. South Australia's Department for Education has developed curriculum scope and sequences, units of work and planning resources translated to the local context that are optional for teachers to adapt (and have been shared with the non government sector). South Australia's curriculum resources also contextualise science elaborations developed by ACARA for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross curriculum priority. The department partnered with South Australian Aboriginal Nations to embed Aboriginal knowledges and ways of knowing into the science curriculum.

The department will adapt version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum for the South Australian context, and from 2024 resources and support will be aligned to the areas of impact in the Strategy for Public Education.

Beyond this, there is significant existing effort at the national level to share across state and sector boundaries comprehensive, quality assured curriculum and assessment materials. This includes through the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (action 19), content developed or collated by Education Services Australia (which can be accessed through services such as Scootle), and the commitment to deliver a national online bank of formative assessments that can be accessed on an opt in basis.

In light of the information set out above, the South Australian Government queries whether there is a need for the Expert Panel to recommend further national reform in this area. If national reform is desired, we urge the Expert Panel to consider the work already underway with a view to recommending whether existing activity should be stopped or rescope.

Noting the Expert Panel's stated interest in small group tuition to support curriculum learning, and its relationship with tiered intervention, there is a need to clearly define and investigate the parameters of these approaches. There are many variables which can influence effectiveness and feasibility, including:

- the timing of intervention (year level targeted)
- cohorts targeted
- whether intervention is implemented in class, or in addition to scheduled classes
- the duration and intensity of intervention
- who delivers instruction (the classroom teacher, teaching assistants, pre service teachers).

The South Australian Government urges the Expert Panel to further investigate the return on investment for small group tuition compared to other potential measures. The [Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit](#) highlights a range of interventions or tools that have a higher impact on learning progression than small group tuition. The most effective of these, namely metacognition and self regulation, has been recognised as a focal point of South Australia's Strategy for Public Education.

The majority of the very high impact low cost interventions focus on teaching practice and strategies for engaging learners. South Australia's Literacy Guarantee is a useful case study in this context.

Evidence based practice has been a core component of South Australia's Literacy Guarantee program, aimed at improving the educational outcomes in literacy for all junior primary students (R-2). Highly skilled literacy coaches provide direct coaching support to teachers in the explicit teaching of reading and phonics for all learners, and extend teachers' understanding and capacity to differentiate and target instruction. The coaches support differentiation and targeted intervention following quality tier 1 (ie whole class) instruction and assessment.

The approach involves:

- Working with leaders to identify focus areas and personnel for targeted literacy coaching
- Implementing a program of ongoing coaching support with identified teachers
- Modelling evidence based pedagogical routines, practices and assessments
- Providing targeted professional learning through workshops and professional learning communities
- Supporting leaders and teachers to analyse phonics screening check data, identify teaching points and plan action.

Since commencement of the Literacy Guarantee in 2018, literacy coach support to schools via the Guarantee has consistently been associated with an improvement in the percentage of students reaching the expected achievement score in the statewide phonics screening check. Strong improvement has been seen for students from priority cohorts (Aboriginal students, students with disability, low SES students) in phonics screening checks where their school is receiving support from a literacy coach.

There is an important difference between the development of a national reform which is designed around the approach described above, and a national reform which prescribes a particular type of intervention

mechanism (such as small group tutoring). The former supports and empowers teachers to implement evidence based teaching practices for all students and increases our teachers' capability to differentiate and target instruction based on each teacher's understanding of what is needed for each student. The latter narrows focus to a particular delivery mechanism, and gives very little weight (if any) to the need for schools and teachers to adapt supports and resources to fit local context.

South Australia's Strategy for Public Education recognises that supporting and empowering teachers to innovate and be at their best is critical for delivering on the purpose of public education. In line with this, South Australia recommends that consideration be given to how reforms focused on teaching quality focus on activating teachers, thereby enabling them to showcase and celebrate their professional identity. Opportunities to network and share information, access professional development and resources, have strong links to service supports and access appropriate resources are all relevant.

Learning environment

The consultation report identifies that the school and classroom learning environment can have a significant impact on learning outcomes. Education Ministers recently agreed to the Teacher Education Expert Panel recommendation to include classroom management as core content for initial teacher education programs, to ensure teachers are taught the skills needed to foster positive learning environments.

Aligned to this work is an opportunity for the Expert Panel to consider the ways in which the underlying causes of disruptive behaviour might be understood and addressed. This links back to the concentration of disadvantage and the growing complexity of classrooms. Rather than a one size fits all approach, teachers need to be supported with tools and strategies to respond to and engage students with varying backgrounds, needs and capabilities.

One such tool South Australia has implemented is trauma informed practice, which supports teachers to understand how trauma impacts the brain and learning (and a child's behaviour) and implement individual and classroom based strategies.

A further feature of the learning environment, which is not discussed in the consultation report, is the physical learning environment. Physical environment shapes the types of learning experiences that are possible and the teaching pedagogies that can be delivered. The capacity to innovate and to meet the changing needs and complexity of learners is often limited by a lack of physical and technological infrastructure, or a lack of resources to adapt existing physical and technological infrastructure. We would welcome the Expert Panel's consideration of this issue in its final report.

Improving student mental health and wellbeing

Measuring wellbeing

South Australia's Strategy for Public Education purposefully focuses on domains of wellbeing that are critical to learning. However, it is recognised that wellbeing is defined differently across Australia's schooling systems, and that different value is placed on each of its component parts according to a system's needs and objectives.

In the absence of a shared definition of wellbeing, the South Australian Government questions the value of national data sets or measures for wellbeing. Further, requiring a single measure would fail to take into account the breadth of factors that contribute to wellbeing and the relative value of these factors for different systems.

The South Australian Department for Education has been administering the Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC) for students in years 4 to 12 for a number of years. The WEC includes questions relating to emotional wellbeing, engagement with school, engagement in learning and health and wellbeing out of school. The results provide insight into the school environment, and support conversations around improving overall student wellbeing. The South Australian Government is willing to share the WEC more broadly to support other states, territories, and sectors in measuring wellbeing within their contexts.

Interface between in school and out of school factors

The Expert Panel has recognised in its report that good mental health and wellbeing in children and young people is not the sole responsibility of schools, and that many factors need to be recognised outside the school gates. However, the panel emphasises that schools are uniquely placed to promote good mental health and wellbeing, identify students requiring further support, and refer them appropriately.

The South Australian Government notes that further supports may be completely outside the education portfolio, and in some cases, outside the remit of state governments. In the next phase of its review, the Expert Panel could consider defining what it considers is the responsibility of schools, and considering how outside services can be effectively ‘wrapped around’ students while at school. Liaison models (like those used in health care) could provide a useful comparison.

Our current and future teachers

Empowered leadership and recognition of non teaching staff

South Australia’s Strategy for Public Education identifies leaders as a critical lever for creating impact for learners. It recognises the role leaders play in working towards the shared purpose for public education, while being flexible to respond to the context of their community. It also outlines the need for greater recognition and understanding of the role of non teaching staff in supporting learners and schools.

The South Australian Government notes that there is limited consideration of leaders and non teaching staff in the Expert Panel’s consultation report. Issues such as attraction, retention, diversity and career pathways also apply to these cohorts, and will likely require tailored approaches. The South Australian Government recommends that the Expert Panel consider this in the next phase of its review.

Collecting data to inform decision making and boost student outcomes

Understanding data needs

The South Australian Government notes that the consideration of data in the consultation report leans strongly towards holding education systems to account for their performance. While the government supports principles of accountability and transparency, it is not the only reason for collecting data and evidence: it is also an important lever for supporting schools to make informed choices to respond to learners, community and context, as outlined in the Strategy for Public Education. The Expert Panel could consider this lens in the next phase of its review.

While noting The Expert Panel’s consultation report recommends two possible means by which the next NSRA could improve data usage: data reform (changing what is collected, or how it is reported) and data improvement (increasing quality, scope, coverage and/or integration of existing datasets).

The South Australian Government considers it critical that any proposed reform or improvement occurs in the context of there being a commitment to the best and most effective use of existing data collections. As part of the National Assessment Program, students take part in a range of assessments with different

national bodies responsible for administering, collecting, storing and reporting on data. These are supplemented by a range of other nationally administered data sources, which are comparable across jurisdictions.

There would be value in the Expert Panel establishing a catalogue of existing collections, and recommending how these could be most appropriately leveraged through the next reform agreement to frame 'success'. For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) already measures wellbeing through student questionnaires, considering a range of constructs such as sense of belonging, engagement, school climate and life satisfaction. These data are not currently used in a consistent way as part of the national reporting framework for schooling.

From the South Australian Government's perspective, an understanding of the core data needed from all schooling sectors to support transparency and informed decision making for education will be critical to understand what data could be better leveraged (or what data is being collected that is no longer required). This means identifying which data has intrinsic value in understanding how well schooling systems are performing, regardless of what national agreements or reforms are in place.

It is also essential that a distinction is made between the inclusion of data reforms and initiatives under the next Agreement, and broader national data holdings, collection and rationale for use. Collaboration and benefit can be made in relation to the latter without the necessity to subsume it into a time limited Agreement with an overarching intent that may not align readily to particular types of measurement.

As the Expert Panel has recognised, requirements to submit data and reports can add to the workload of teachers and leaders. The value of data must be weighed carefully against the burden it would place on teachers and schools.

Funding transparency and accountability

Interface between the government and non government sectors

All sectors have a role to play in supporting an Australian education system which promotes both excellence and equity. Sharing information, evidence and outputs of work can support improvement of outcomes for students in all systems.

South Australia has a tradition of sharing across sectors – for example, curriculum resources developed by the department are provided to the non government sectors, as was the Our Learning SA platform which supported online lesson planning through COVID-19.

Where the Catholic or independent sectors pilot innovative approaches to teaching and learning, or are early adopters of new technologies, there would be significant value in evaluation and outcomes being shared across sectors. While noting there are some differences across the cohorts in each sector (as outlined above), this would help build a body of evidence around the demonstrated value and effectiveness of particular reforms in a given jurisdiction. Government sectors could make a similar commitment.

This is consistent with the idea of creating a learning system and evaluating for impact, which are guiding principles within South Australia's Strategy for Public Education. This may also support the transparency objectives outlined by the Expert Panel, particularly where pilots and innovation are targeted towards equity cohorts.