

Victorian Government submission

Introduction

Since 2014, the Victorian Government has invested in far reaching reforms to improve outcomes for all students. This includes investment in evidence-based teaching and learning, student mental health and wellbeing, tailored supports for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, disability inclusion reforms, and teacher workforce attraction and retention strategies. In recognition of the importance of contemporary learning spaces for improving learning and teaching outcomes, 75 new schools and 1,940 school upgrades have also been delivered.

At the same time, the Victoria Government is delivering an ambitious reform agenda in early childhood education through the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms, which will provide 2 years of play based early childhood education for every Victorian child. This will be a crucial part of Victorian children's education journey.

Victoria's focus under the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) is to ensure increased funding and resources are targeted to improving outcomes for all students, including growing and retaining a quality teaching workforce, so that all children can achieve a high-quality education as part of attending a great local school wherever they live and whatever their needs.

Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the work of the Expert Panel, which has been tasked to undertake a *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* (the Review). The Consultation Paper highlights matters of national education importance for contemporary schools and school systems across the country.

The following key principles should underpin the Expert Panel's consideration of how and where national effort is directed as part of the next NSRA:

- states and territories have constitutional responsibility for school education in Australia, and that they individually and collectively deliver the majority of funding for school education
- national reforms should be evidence based and focus on shared, enduring challenges where national collaboration is the most efficient and effective way to deliver better outcomes
- national reforms should build on existing state and territory investment and reforms where possible, and provide flexibility for states and territories to tailor reform effort, and allocated funding, to reflect local needs and circumstances
- a substantial and sophisticated suite of education outcomes data is already collected and reported at the national level – any proposal to expand this should be carefully considered, add value, and place no additional burden on schools.

The next NSRA should recognise the respective roles and expertise of the Australian, state and territory governments, and recognise and strengthen existing efforts to share knowledge and support innovation with a strong focus on shared challenges across the nation's schools and education systems.

As the Expert Panel acknowledges, Australia has a robust and effective national education system. However, the consultation paper appropriately raises many national challenges for schooling that should be considered in the context of the next NSRA.

Lessons from current National Priority Initiatives show that we should focus national reform on a smaller number of targeted reforms that require the efforts of the Australian Government, states and territories to drive improvement.

The Expert Panel should consider the benefits of a national approach, grounded in evidence, in the following key areas:

- the persistent gap in educational outcomes for priority cohorts and disadvantaged students, which is compounded by the concentration of disadvantage (which occurs particularly within government school systems)
- closing the gap in outcomes for First Nations students
- the need for improved numeracy outcomes across both primary and secondary schools where Australia remains behind other leading countries
- workforce attraction and retention strategies to ensure an adequate supply of teachers, which is critical to improving student outcomes, particularly for schools in rural and remote areas, in areas of rapid population growth, and in specific subject areas such as STEM.

Care should be taken to recognise where critical interdependencies exist when identifying reform priorities. For instance, the important relationship between lifting the supply of specialist (mathematics) in field teachers and lifting numeracy outcomes across all jurisdictions. The availability of workforce and impact of new initiatives that attract teachers away from the students, classrooms and schools should be a key consideration in considering any new national reforms.

Victorian context

The Victorian school education system supports all Victorians to reach their potential, regardless of their background, postcode, or circumstance, by equipping students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes they need to participate and thrive within and beyond school.

The Victorian government school system is the second largest school system in Australia, comprising more than 1,560 government schools that are responsible for educating approximately 645,000 Victorian students. Victoria's diverse and thriving non-government sector educates approximately 370,000 students across Victoria's Catholic and independent schools.

Over the life of the NSRA, Victoria has delivered an unprecedented level of funding to support its ambitious vision for school reform. From 2014–15 to 2020–21, cumulative growth in Victorian Government recurrent expenditure for government schools grew by 23.8%.¹

Major reforms delivered over the past 8 years have fundamentally changed the experiences and education of Victorian students. Informed by evidence-based practices, key Victorian school education reforms include:

- introduction of the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms, which will provide 2 years of play based early childhood education for every Victorian child. This will be a crucial part of Victorian children's education journey
- more than 75 new government schools in Victoria's fastest-growing areas, and 1,940 school upgrades amounting to more than \$14.9 billion of investment, noting this Victorian Government capital investment is in addition to school funding commitments under the NSRA
- delivering mental health and wellbeing resources across all government schools to ensure students have access to the supports they need, including the Mental Health Fund in secondary schools
- the elevation of wellbeing alongside learning to form the twin pillars of the government school improvement framework, the *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes* (FISO), in recognition of wellbeing as a core outcome of schooling that will enable young people to thrive and respond positively to challenges and opportunities in life
- the roll-out of a new Disability Inclusion funding model, which is transforming support for students with a disability in government schools as part of a shift in focus toward a strength-based, personalised approach to ensure every student can thrive at school and in life
- the reform of equity funding for government schools to support students' learning needs, through the provision of additional funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the introduction of funding for students entering secondary school who are falling behind
- the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which prioritises literacy and numeracy across all government schools, and the Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which provides intensive teaching supports to government secondary school students at risk of leaving school without the skills they need for future work and study
- the Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI), which provides funding for all government schools to employ tutors to deliver targeted, small group learning support to students who are below, or at risk of falling below, national minimum standards in literacy or numeracy
- senior secondary pathways reforms, with fundamental changes including the new Vocational Major (as part of the VCE) and Victorian Pathways Certificate, providing all Victorian students with access to an expanded range of subjects and learning opportunities and higher quality VET to expand career opportunities for all students
- a suite of workforce initiatives to attract and retain teachers, including enhanced and innovative Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs; career pathways for expert teachers to remain in the classroom, reduced face-to-face teaching time; and fast-tracking of high-achieving mid-career changers

¹ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2023*: <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/child-care-education-and-training/school-education>.

- the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, which is an Australian first, established to deliver advanced professional learning for Victorian’s expert teachers and school leaders from all school sectors, including the flagship Teaching Excellence Program.

As part of State Government recurrent funding to non-government schools, program funding is delivered to low-fee-paying non-government schools for specific education reform initiatives, including the Mental Health in Primary Schools program and Tutor Learning Initiative.

Response to matters raised in the discussion paper

Improving student outcomes for equity cohorts

The Expert Panel refers to Australia’s concentration of disadvantaged students in government schools and that it is high compared to other OECD nations and increasing at the second fastest rate in the OECD.² As the Expert Panel observes, where disadvantage is concentrated, schools face greater challenges in supporting students with multiple and complex needs.

In Victorian government schools, according to the Report on Government Services (2023), 27.8% of students have low socio-educational advantage status. This is more than twice the share of students in the Victorian non-government school sector. All states and territories share this challenge, highlighting the need for full and fair funding for government schools to enable states and territories to expand tailored learning and wellbeing supports for highly vulnerable or disadvantaged students.

Victoria has made substantial investments to improve outcomes for priority cohorts under the current NSRA. For instance, small group tutoring was introduced to address the learning impacts of COVID-19 and is continuing to support students that are at risk of falling behind. Victoria delivers breakfast clubs, glasses for kids and period products programs as well as the LOOKOUT program for children in out of home care, and the Navigator program that works with chronically absent secondary school students.

Collective efforts between different levels of government and government agencies, including better linkage of social services and education data, could support earlier identification and wrap around supports to vulnerable students and their families. The impact of disadvantage on learning outcomes cannot be addressed by the education portfolio alone, but requires coordinated action across health, disability, and social services to provide wholistic and integrated support to our most vulnerable students.

In Victoria, progress is being made to close the gap in educational outcomes for First Nations students and their peers, but further work is needed. The Victorian Government is committed to working in partnership with First Nations people and self-determination in education will enhance learning and wellbeing outcomes for First Nations students.

Building on the Expert Panel’s observations, Victoria would welcome evidence-based insights and reforms that are focused on improving student outcomes, particularly for equity cohorts.

Improving student mental health and wellbeing

The Victorian Government has made significant and sustained investments in mental health and wellbeing reforms in Victorian government schools. Recommendations by the Expert Panel for new national reforms should recognise significant work already underway by state and territories and not constrain early movers and innovators in this space.

Victoria is well progressed in implementing its major mental health reforms including:

- the Mental Health Fund and Menu, which supports government schools to select programs, staff and supports from a 3-tiered, curated, evidence-based menu to best meet their students’ needs. A rigorous evidence assessment process underpins the Schools Mental Health Menu.
- the Mental Health in Primary Schools program, which funds Mental Health and Wellbeing Leaders in every government and low-fee non-government primary school to implement a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing, build staff capability, and establish referral pathways for students needing external support.
- the Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools program, which is funding school psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, or mental health nurses in every government secondary and specialist school to

² OECD, *Equity in Education*: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264073234-en.pdf?expires=1690241450&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=1DD317C34AA486E13BFAA2AF66EAC114>

implement whole-school wellbeing programs, provide counselling to students, and coordinate support for students with complex needs.

Victoria's mental health and wellbeing reforms are underpinned by investment in new teaching and allied health workforces. An expanded role for schools in health and wellbeing nationally will also benefit from a national approach to address allied health workforce supply. The Australian Government holds many of the levers that can address broader allied health workforce supply challenges, including in mental health, which has direct impacts on the supply of allied health staff available to work in schools.

Building the national evidence base on student wellbeing

Student wellbeing measures should be focused on in-school factors that can be directly influenced by schools, such as sense of connection to school, rather than subjective measures of wellbeing that are strongly influenced by outside school factors which schools have limited ability to change.

In Victoria, student wellbeing monitoring frameworks include a number of different instruments and surveys that capture school students' attitudes and experiences at school and in the classroom, including bullying, student voice and agency and well as broader factors, such as nutrition and access to health services. Parents are also surveyed on their child's entry to primary school to identify any developmental or health concerns.

There may be benefit in developing a national framework of wellbeing indicators to guide best practice for jurisdictions and school systems in measuring wellbeing and to inform the national evidence base. This could include national agreement to a specific set of questions about students' sense of connection to school, or sense of belonging.

Address national teacher workforce supply

As recognised by the Expert Panel, quality teaching is the most important in-school factor for lifting student outcomes.

Along with all states and territories, Victoria is experiencing teacher supply pressures. These challenges are particularly acute for specialist schools, schools in rural and remote areas, in areas of rapidly expanding population growth, and in specific subject areas such as STEM.

Since 2019, the Victorian Government has invested \$1.4 billion to support the attraction and retention of the teaching workforce. Victoria's investment is focused on 5 key priority areas:

1. **Attraction:** The *Teach Today* and *Teach Tomorrow* employment-based pathways is fast tracking graduates and career changers into classrooms. The *Teach the Future* communications and recruitment campaign is raising the status of teaching and attracting the best to the profession.
2. **Recruitment and distribution:** Targeted Financial Incentives and international recruitment incentives are attracting teachers to hard to staff roles. There are also financial supports offered to pre-service teachers to undertake their placements in rural and regional schools.
3. **Induction:** The Career Start pilot, which is providing our graduate teaching workforce with tailored induction and mentoring supports.
4. **Retention:** A 1.5-hour reduction in face-to-face teaching hours in government schools, with implementation phased over 2023 and 2024, to provide teachers more time to focus on quality instruction. The *Returning Teacher Support Service* is assisting teachers not currently teaching to return to our classrooms.
5. **Career pathways and flexibility:** Learning Specialists and Leading Teacher classifications provide career pathways for highly skilled teachers to remain in the classroom and work with other teachers to improve their practice. The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership provides advanced professional learning to expert teachers from all school sectors, including the Teaching Excellence Program.

As part of the 2023-24 Budget, the Victorian Government has invested \$40 million to support implementation of the revised Victorian Curriculum F-10, including a comprehensive package of curriculum, planning and assessment supports to reduce teacher workload while continuing to value teacher professional judgement. As Victoria adopts and adapts the Australian Curriculum, like some other jurisdictions, it would not be efficient or effective to develop a single national curriculum resource bank.

As part of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, education ministers are working to address workforce supply challenges; however, there is more to be done. The Expert Panel should consider how Australian Government policy levers could strengthen existing efforts. This could include expanding the supply of Commonwealth Supported Places for ITE, and providing scholarships and income support to attract prospective students to take up these places, expansion of

migration visas for people with teaching qualifications, and other incentives such as teacher superannuation scheme rules and taxation arrangements, including the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP).

Supporting and encouraging a more culturally and linguistically diverse school education workforce is important to improving students' engagement in learning, which is a precursor for improving schooling outcomes for all students.

Increasing the number of First Nations people in the education workforce will be critical to closing the gap in learning and wellbeing outcomes for First Nations students and embedding First Nations perspectives in school education. Jurisdictions should work together to strengthen the inclusion, self-determination and cultural safety of First Nations educators and support staff in Australian schools.

Appropriate data collection, monitoring and reporting

Victoria supports building the national evidence base to inform decision-making to improve outcomes for students. This includes periodic reviews of the National Measurement Framework (NMF) to ensure it captures meaningful measures of schooling performance; and alignment of the NMF and the next NSRA with relevant broader policy frameworks, such as the national agreement on Closing the Gap and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031.

The states and territories have sophisticated and tailored data collection, monitoring, and reporting frameworks relevant to their local context and reform priorities, much of which is publicly reported. Victoria Government school system collects data at system, school, and student-level data, including teacher, parent and carer, and student survey data to inform system, school, and classroom-level decision-making.

National data collection, monitoring and reporting should:

- be mindful of current workforce constraints, and demonstrate real benefits for students given any new requirements are likely to trickle down to teachers and school leaders
- not duplicate existing work and leverage existing mechanisms where possible
- not be used to unhelpfully compare states and territories, school sectors, or individual schools.

States and territories are highly accountable and transparent

Public accountability and reporting

The Victorian Government maintains a high level of accountability and transparency for the funding of government schools and the impacts of its school education reforms through school, state, and national accountability, and reporting arrangements.

Victorian reporting measures include detailed annual public reporting as part of State Budget papers and Annual Reports and public hearings of the Victorian Parliamentary Accounts and Estimates Committee. The Victorian Auditor General's Office undertakes independent financial and performance audits of the school education portfolio, which are published on its website.

The Victorian government school system is highly accountable and transparent to the community. Victorian government school councils are required to publish an annual report to their school community, which is published on the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority website and school websites linked to My School.

At the national level, Victoria provides data for the National Report on Schooling in Australia published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. Victorian compliance with funding requirements under section 22A of the *Australian Education Act 2013* (the Act) is annually assessed by the National School Resourcing Board and published by the Australian Government.

The NSRA Expert Panel should consider the appropriateness of government and public oversight and reporting for all school sectors. National accountability and reporting obligations should:

- avoid duplication of existing state and territory measures for government schools
- recognise the proportional share of investment by each level of government in each school sector
- recognise the robust public accountability and transparency mechanisms states and territories already have in place, including through their respective parliaments.

National targets and data

The current approach to NSRA targets includes an appropriate suite of high-level, reliable, national system targets. Any targets selected for the next NSRA should be aligned to the measures of a revised NMF and broader policy frameworks, such as the national agreement on Closing the Gap.

The Expert Panel has appropriately raised concerns regarding data sharing around privacy-related issues, the creation of league tables, and increased resource and administration burden on teachers and schools. The collection and public reporting of state level data is extensive. Data collection must be purposeful and deliver real benefits for schools and students.

Next steps

The Victorian Government welcomes the opportunity to work collaboratively towards building school education systems that promote excellence and equity for every Australian student. Victoria looks forward to further discussions with the Expert Panel on Victoria's reforms and the best direction of national energy and effort to improve student outcomes.

National reforms should focus on shared, enduring challenges where national collaboration is the most efficient and effective way to deliver outcomes. Local flexibility in implementation by states and territories, who are best placed to respond to local need and circumstances, should be maintained.