

Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) Flexible Schools Ltd welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper*.

About EREA Flexible Schools

Founded in 1987, EREA Flexible Schools (EREA Flexis) operates 21 Flexible Learning Centres and two Special Schools around Australia in all states and territories except the ACT and Victoria. (EREA also have a Flexi Schools with multiple campuses in Victoria.) Each Flexible Learning Centre is a registered school and offers educational pathways for young people in years seven to 12 who have disengaged from more traditional, mainstream school settings.

EREA Flexis' approach to education is as unique as our community of young people, with strengths-based, trauma-aware learning at the core. Founded on concepts of radical inclusion and an unconditional positive regard for young people, we work on common ground where power is shared and everyone has voice and agency in decision making. Rather than relying on school rules and punitive consequences, we build relationships, and every member of the community commits to doing their best to work within our four principles of respect, participation, honesty and being safe and legal.

In 2023, EREA Flexible Schools Ltd became its own entity through a restructure of Edmund Rice Education Australia. Our new, aligned and unified approach helps to ensure that young people who attend Flexi Schools experience the highest quality education possible in the safest and most dynamic schools in the country.

Responses to the Consultation Paper

As a provider of education services that respond to the diverse and unique needs of young people in communities across Australia, we understand the power of education to transform lives. We recognise the importance of the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) to ensuring young people have the opportunity to learn, develop and grow.

Recent rounds of reform, including implementation of recommendations from the Gonski Review and funding linked to the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD), have enabled Flexis to expand our reach and enhance our quality of care to young people across Australia. At a minimum, we are calling for current levels of funding to be safeguarded through future rounds of reform.

Beyond the topic of funding, we offer our expertise to support the development of the next NSRA. We acknowledge that ours is not the only model, but we know it works. We have more than three decades of experience in supporting young people to learn, develop and find their place in each of their communities.

In this spirit, our submission seeks to assist and inform the advice of the Expert Panel by drawing from our experience and knowledge in relation to four key findings, each of which relate to specific questions in the Consultation Paper.

1. A trauma-aware approach is critical to engaging at-risk young people (Response to Question 2)

The nature of our service offering means young people who are referred to Flexis have already disengaged from more traditional, mainstream school settings. Each one of our 2,100 young people across Australia have become disenfranchised for a number of complex reasons. Many of the young people who come to Flexis have experienced personal trauma, alongside a predominantly punitive approach to behaviour in mainstream school settings, which has exacerbated feelings of isolation, school refusal and a negative association with learning and education.

Flexis change the narrative for young people, and provide an educational experience defined by radical inclusion, hope, fun and opportunity. Through evidence-based practices including *trauma-aware education* and *collaborative problem solving*, we focus on building trust with young people to re-engage them in their education journey and transform their idea of what it means to learn.

Trauma-aware education is a critical approach within Flexi Schools, not least because of its effectiveness in re-engaging young people in their learning journey. It is a worthy approach to be considered within the next NSRA, because trauma is not isolated to young people who attend Flexi Schools. Between 2020 and 2021, one in every 32 children aged less than 18 years received child protection services in Australia¹.

Trauma is an experience so overwhelming it exceeds a person's ability to cope. For young people, trauma can slow or stop vital developments, which can manifest in difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships, a severely compromised working memory, an inability to self-regulate emotions, experiences with anxiety or depression, self-harm, and feeling threatened by new experiences or people. Many Indigenous young people also experience intergenerational trauma resulting from trauma passed down through generations.

All Flexi School staff are trained in trauma-aware education. We understand how trauma can impact young people and their capacity to learn, we create learning experiences with this in

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2020-21/contents/summary>

mind and we see the results of these efforts – students who fully re-engage with their education in Flexible Schools are often hesitant to move back to mainstream schooling.

At Flexi Schools, teaching and learning is characterised by small class sizes, a flexible curriculum that draws on individual interest and needs, and a democratic pedagogical approach that encourages learner empowerment and autonomy. We also focus on strengths-based language, encouraging our young people to know and name their strengths.

A large number of Flexi staff have also undertaken intensive formal training in *Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)* – an evidence-based, trauma-aware practice proven to reduce challenging behaviour, teach young people the skills they lack and build strong relationships. CPS is built on the simple idea that all young people want to do well and behave well, and if they are not able to, it is simply a lack of skill rather than a lack of desire.

Flexi staff are trained to determine what kind of skills are preventing a young person to behave well and what kind of situations result in challenging behaviour, and how these gaps in skills can be developed to engage and motivate young people in their learning journey. At a minimum, we collaboratively solve problems with young people, and give young people agency in what and how they learn.

This approach requires significant training, support and perseverance. It is not easy. However, it enables us to create environments where young people can choose to engage in a learning community where they are welcome, valued, supported and challenged to be the best possible versions of themselves.

*2. An unconditional positive regard for young people builds trust and confidence
(Response to Question 8)*

At Flexis, we recognise that our biggest asset is the relationships we build with young people. We aim to know our students well, to build a foundation of trust with them, and to empower our staff to find ways to connect and support young people's wellbeing in the way that works best for them. When mental health and wellbeing is supported effectively, young people are engaged in their learning journey, they choose to attend school, and they feel comfortable communicating with teachers and staff if there is something preventing them from feeling safe and supported.

This is how we know we are doing our job well at Flexis. Our young people want to come to school, and there is a more honest dialogue between staff and students. This honest dialogue is critical to providing early interventions to at-risk young people, particularly those who would benefit from the support of external service providers. When these kinds of services are provided early, and when we demonstrate an unconditional positive regard for young people, we are giving students the best possible chance to engage fully in their learning journey.

We cannot speak for all schools about what is needed to deliver these results. However, for Flexis, the effectiveness of our approach is grounded in our commitment to delivering a strengths-based, trauma-aware learning experience.

This is in part possible because we employ as many youth workers as we do teachers in many of our schools. While this approach is very staff-intensive, and is only possible through the funding support we receive, we have found that this investment in relationships has had a transformative impact on many young people who have otherwise disengaged from mainstream school settings.

Often young people come to us thinking they cannot learn – we show them they can. Our first priority is to ensure students feel safe, welcome and do not feel like a failure. Our mantra of maintaining an unconditional positive regard for these young people means providing unwavering support. We give students the opportunity to define what will work best for them, with services to adapt to their needs.

Irrespective of the behaviour of young people, they are always welcome. This form of radical inclusion helps to build young people's confidence, reframing their concept of education and showing them they can learn.

3. Deepening connections between schools, community service providers and government agencies will only benefit young people (Response to Question 14)

Across the communities in which we operate, Flexis work in close partnership with external services. These include government services across education, youth justice and social services, but also community providers such as headspace, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services and many others.

The stronger these connections, the better we can support the young people in our care. We recognise the importance of working with external services to ensure young people receive the support they need, and that in many cases this support may be complex, multi-faceted and sensitive to the needs and traumas of each student.

There is scope to strengthen and formalise these connections across communities through the use of deeply collaborative agreements and frameworks. These can ensure communication between schools and broader support services is regular, goes beyond one-way reporting, and enables risks for vulnerable young people to be mitigated sensibly and collaboratively. Crucially, these relationships must go beyond organisation-to-organisation engagement, instead enabling officer-to-officer conversations about the needs of each young person.

One of the outcomes of growing trust between staff and students at schools is an increase in the likelihood of young people to make disclosures of child safety concerns and incidents to their teachers and support workers. Having strong connections with external service providers enables these risks to be shared and mitigated collaboratively to ensure at-risk young people

receive timely, pragmatic and personalised support when they need it most. The benefits of providing this support are immense, and the risks to the wellbeing of young people are too important to be left to ad hoc engagement between relevant organisations.

Flexis provide a model for how connections with services beyond the school gate benefit students and support their wellbeing. We would be happy to explore options to develop stronger connections through a more structured approach, overseen by relevant government agencies. In partnership with these agencies, we could pilot the development of metrics for tracking these relationships, so long as the onus is on governments to establish, track and take accountability for these metrics.

4. Success can and should mean much more than a final year score

We need to broaden definitions of success. This is true not only for young people that are at risk of falling behind, but also more generally. Student testing scores – culminating in a singular final year mark – are blunt tools for assessing performance. These marks fail to take account of a young person’s performance in relation to their education, social and cultural backgrounds. They also drastically oversimplify the effect of their experience in schooling on their wellbeing and their capacity to lead productive, happy and fulfilling lives once they leave school. The next NSRA should seek to shift perceptions around measuring success, and incorporate broader measures of student wellbeing at the individual and school levels.

Given the breadth of our Flexi Schools, the experiences of young people in our care can provide rich data to assist with monitoring progress and redefining success. We would be happy to explore ways in which we can support the development of more inclusive and meaningful measures of student performance and wellbeing if useful.

EREA Flexible Schools Ltd would welcome the opportunity to provide further support

We would be happy to provide further assistance to the Expert Panel in the development of its advice to Education Ministers. EREA Flexible Schools have worked with a number of researchers and universities, and maintains strong links to the academic community. Many of these resources can be found on our website.²

On a personal note, I recently completed a Doctor of Education on ‘An Exploration of Inclusivity in Edmund Rice Education Australia’. I would be happy to share the outcomes of this research or discuss further opportunities for the experience of the Flexis model to inform future policy and reform decisions.

² <https://www.ereafsn.edu.au/academic-papers-and-journals/>

Beyond advice, we know that demand for our model of education and care is growing, with calls from communities across Australia for more Flexis in more areas. This means that the needs of young people in many communities are not being met. While we cannot expand to meet every community's needs, we would be happy to work in partnership with other sectors and education providers to support them to cater for the needs of young people.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important reform process. Should you wish to discuss this further, please contact me [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely,



Dr Matt Hawkins
Director and CEO
EREA Flexible Schools Networks Ltd