

Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Foundation House Submission, August 2023

Overview of Foundation House

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST, also known as [Foundation House](#)) provides services to people of refugee backgrounds who have experienced torture and other traumatic events in their country of origin or while fleeing those countries. Politically neutral and non-aligned, Foundation House is a not-for-profit organisation that offers services in metropolitan, regional, and rural Victoria.

Foundation House is a member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), a network of Australia's eight specialist refugee rehabilitation agencies that work to support the recovery of individuals, families, and communities. We provide assistance to individual survivors, their families, and communities, as well as build the capacity of the education and early years sector, primary health care and mainstream mental health services.

The Foundation House Education and Early Years Team

Foundation House's Education and Early Years team assists schools and early years services across Victoria, supporting their work with children, young people and families from refugee backgrounds. Schools play an important role in supporting recovery, resettlement and integration processes for children and families, whose lives have been disrupted by conflict, persecution, and long-term displacement.

Specialist services offered for schools include: participation in the [Refugee Education Support Program \(RESP\)](#), professional learning workshops, secondary consultations, professional learning and networking for [Multicultural Education Aides \(MEAs\)](#) and Bicultural workers in schools, action planning and strategic guidance, and the development of resources available on our [Schools in for Refugees website](#). We also engage in advocacy and provide policy advice to government and other stakeholders, on matters relating to the educational experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. Due to the support of the Victorian Department of Education, these services are provided at no cost to schools. Our [Early Years program](#) offers communities of practice, professional learning, resources and secondary consultations for services working with families with children from birth to eight years, recognising the crucial role of early years education in positive life outcomes.

About this Submission

This submission responds to the 'Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System: Consultation Paper'. Foundation House has considered areas of focus and chosen to provide feedback on selected questions in each of the chapters. A further question has been added in Chapter 3 to discuss a priority outside of the scope of the provided questions. Our responses are informed by our capacity building work and research with the education and early years sectors, as well as feedback from young people, families, and community groups that we support. Foundation House welcomes any opportunity to discuss these responses in further detail.

Chapter 2: Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

4. *Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?*

Students of likely refugee background may face multiple barriers to accessing education equitably. While all newly arrived students grapple with English language learning and navigating unfamiliar systems, students of refugee backgrounds have generally faced multiple traumatic events and may have had disrupted or limited formal schooling¹. For these same reasons, there are also many barriers to parent engagement, which can lead to further educational disadvantage, given the strong links between parent engagement and student outcomes². Young people born in Australia whose families are part of a community who have been persecuted, are victims of war or otherwise forced to flee, may also experience the impacts of intergenerational trauma. As many families grapple with the challenges of raising children who are immersed in another culture; children and young people may struggle with identity and belonging, connection to culture and language. Foundation House have published research regarding the barriers and facilitators for learning and engagement, as well as peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, careers and pathways, multiple pressures and mental health, transition and orientation, school engagement with families, community links, financial hardship, and material assistance.³ Some of the benefits of tracking students of likely refugee backgrounds as a cohort are that it would likely lead to improvements in:

- Use of interpreting and translating as routine practice in schools,
- Use of trauma informed practices,
- Knowledge around and routine use of English as an Additional Language (EAL) strategies,
- The role of schools as a culturally safe and sustaining space for children, young people and families,
- Greater diversity in the education workforce, and
- Greater supports in hard to staff schools and new arrivals programs.

The risks involved in tracking students from likely refugee backgrounds as a cohort are that it is a challenge to define the cohort. This is further explored in Chapter 6's discussion regarding some of the challenges to defining EAL learners. There is also no existing, consistent understanding of students from refugee backgrounds, as a distinct cohort from other EAL students, at a systems or school level. Making decisions about what will improve outcomes without input from the communities themselves is also a risk. Doing this work well presents a challenge, due to the diverse nature of Australia's communities of refugee backgrounds organisations such as the [Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health](#) provide a model for how such work can be undertaken successfully. Use

¹ Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2023, *School's in for Refugees*, <https://sifr.foundationhouse.org.au/>

² Emerson L., Fear J., Fox S., and Sanders E., 2012, *Parental Engagement in Learning and Schooling: Lessons from Research*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family–School and Community Partnerships Bureau, https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/7/filename/Parental_engagement_in_learning_and_schooling_Lessons_from_research_BUREAU_ARACY_August_2012.pdf

³ Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2019, *'School is where you need to be equal and learn': insights from students of refugee backgrounds on learning and engagement in Victorian secondary schools*, https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/STUDENT-PERSPECTIVE-RESEARCH-PROJECT-REPORT_A4_WEB.pdf

of the data to stigmatise or undermine the efforts of such communities to feel belonged and connected to broader Australian society is also a risk that needs to be considered carefully.

Chapter 3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing

11. *Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?*

It is important to provide opportunities for students, as well as families, to feedback about their perceptions of safety, belonging, and school climate. They provide a valuable insight into the inclusiveness of the school environment and whether it is meeting their needs. However, surveys may not be the most appropriate or accessible means of engaging their voices. Students and families who speak EAL are a key group to engage in these conversations, but they may face barriers to providing their feedback via surveys. This could include their English language and literacy capabilities, digital literacy, as well as hesitancy providing honest feedback on sensitive topics.

In Victoria, these challenges are evident in collection of data through the annual [Attitudes to School Survey](#), for students and parents/carers. Schools provide varying levels of support to enable their EAL students and families to engage with the surveys. In circumstances of low response rates, this may not indicate lack of engagement or interest in providing feedback, but rather the lack of accessibility of surveys for this cohort. Research also indicates that student perception surveys are limited in their impact, unless a school focuses on what actions they will take in response to the feedback and reporting back to the affected students.⁴

It may be more appropriate to encourage schools to consult with students and families through informal conversations and advisory/focus groups. These could be facilitated by trusted members of school staff, including a Multicultural Education Aid (MEA)/bicultural worker where possible. Ideally, it should also include reporting back to student and family representatives about what meaningful action the school will take in response to their feedback. This should be accompanied by school staff and leaders making an ongoing, intentional effort to build trust and relationships with students and families, particularly those who face barriers to engagement in the school community.

Foundation House's approach to consulting with students from refugee backgrounds can be used as an example of meaningful practice. Documented in our ['School is where you need to be equal and learn' report](#), we recommend such strategies as using focus groups to ensure that literacy skills are not required for participation, providing opportunities to contribute in first languages, and employing a range of activities in order to support contribution in a variety of ways.⁵

⁴ Finefter-Rosenbluh, I., et. al., 2021, 'The Impact of student perception surveys on teachers' practice: Teacher resistance and struggle in student voice-based assessment initiatives of effective teaching', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 106: October 2021

⁵ Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2019, '*School is where you need to be equal and learn*': insights from students of refugee backgrounds on learning and engagement in Victorian secondary schools, https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/STUDENT-PERSPECTIVE-RESEARCH-PROJECT-REPORT_A4_WEB.pdf

14. What can be done to ensure schools can easily refer students to services outside the school gate that they need to support their wellbeing? How can this be done without adding to teacher and leader workload?

In Foundation House's experience assisting schools to refer students for counselling support, there are several practical considerations that strengthen referral pathways between schools and community agencies. Foundation House accept school referrals for specialised [counselling and advocacy support](#) for young people and families recovering from refugee trauma. The following suggestions could be considered to improve referral processes:

- A designated school staff member who oversees referral processes and builds relationships with external agencies, as part of their role.
- Increased funding and support for [Community Hub](#) models that promote student and family connection with services and opportunities in the broader community.
- Specific funding for schools to hire Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs)/bicultural workers, build their capacity, and provide appropriate supervision, as staff members who are well-placed to connect students and families from refugee backgrounds with appropriate community supports.
- Allocated time for specific school staff to participate in relevant local networks to keep up to date with services and referral options to support student health and wellbeing.
- Schools providing external agencies with an appropriate onsite space for individual and group support programs (e.g., counselling room).
- School staff having access to a maintained up-to-date directory of appropriate state-wide agencies and services that support student mental health and wellbeing, with relevant referral information.
- Schools being encouraged and supported to work in partnership with a cluster of local schools and keep a collective directory of local agencies and services specific to their community.
- School staff having access to appropriate templates for referral and partnership planning (e.g., referral protocol, MoUs).

Additional question: What are the priority gaps in assistance for schools to support student mental health and wellbeing?

Foundation House believe that anti-racism work needs to be included and prioritised in the conversation about supporting student health and wellbeing. Through consultation with students, families, community groups and schools, we consistently hear reports about the prevalence of racism in schools, and its detrimental impact on student mental health and wellbeing. The 2017 Speak Out Against Racism survey found that 60% of student participants reported seeing other students racially discriminated against by their peers, and 43% by teachers.⁶ The 2020-21 Ubuntu Project's survey found that 87% of student participants of African backgrounds reported feeling discriminated at

⁶ Priest, N., et. al., 2019, *Findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) student and staff surveys*, Australian National University, https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/8/CSRM-WP-SOAR_PUBLISH_1.pdf

school due to their race, ethnic background or religion.⁷ These experiences have devastating impacts on student mental health and wellbeing outcomes, with research demonstrating links to depression, anxiety, behavioural difficulties, and suicide risk.⁸ When persistently endured, racism can also contribute to social disconnection, disengagement from education, substance abuse, and higher risk of involvement in the youth justice system.⁹

Despite significant investment in student mental health and wellbeing supports in Victoria (and Australian-wide), there remains limited connection with addressing racism, as a significant contributor to poor mental health outcomes. School staff feedback that they lack the confidence, awareness and skills to have sensitive conversations about racism with students and families and are unsure how to appropriately respond to incidents of racism.

In a Victorian context, Foundation House welcomes the [Schools Mental Health Menu](#) in supporting schools and staff to access the programs, training, resources and interventions that they need to support student mental health. However, there are currently no anti-racism support options available on the menu. Foundation House are aware that there are various organisations that offer meaningful professional learning, resources and support in this area, including the [Centre for Multicultural Youth's \(CMY\) School's Standing up to Racism program](#). However, funding and direction from relevant Departments of Education would be required to ensure schools prioritise and can afford such supports.

Foundation House believe it is critical that a stronger and more consistent approach to anti-racism is developed across the national education sector. A national policy and supporting recommendations would prioritise anti-racism as a key area for schools to support positive student mental health and wellbeing, and long-term life outcomes. The NSW Department of Education's approach, with a mandated [Anti-racism Policy](#) and [Anti-racism Contact Officers](#) in every school, could be considered as a model to encourage Australian-wide. Schools need to be resourced well to provide training and assistance for all their staff, to improve their individual awareness and skills, as well as the broader policies and processes within their school community.

Chapter 4: Our current and future teachers

19. What can be done to attract a diverse group of people into the teaching profession to ensure it looks like the broader community?

Foundation House considers the importance of creating incentives and pathways for potential teachers that are representative of the student cohort and bring diverse experiences to the education system. In the context of supporting students of refugee and immigrant backgrounds, exposure to educators from the same or other diverse backgrounds improves access to quality teaching. Currently in Australian schools, the teaching profession is not diverse and representative of the broader student group. Diversity and representation benefits students of migrant and refugee

⁷ Ubuntu Project, 2022, *Racism in Schools: African Australian Students Speak Up*, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K71hPikSOUYiET-P9sZPfy4aAomXLPjN/view?fbclid=IwAR3dQkzZzmrLvBaFboP9oGxlmVRCYVFJR1Zk_zEYV3WkehM_HEAe1YSQ1cE

⁸ Priest, N. et. al., 2021, *Racism, racial discrimination and child and youth health: a rapid evidence synthesis*, https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Final_Racism-full-technical-report.pdf

⁹ VicHealth, 2014, *Racism and its links to the health of children and young people*, https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/VH_Racism-and-Child-Health_FactSheet.pdf

backgrounds by raising teachers' expectations of students' abilities and success, offering more relevant and inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and providing role models and mentors in teaching roles that are representative of the student group.¹⁰

In NSW, in response to teacher shortages, [The Sydney Institute for Community Language Education](#), has developed an evidence base for community language teachers having more accessible professional learning pathways to a teaching qualification. The key findings from their research have identified that English language assessment and support in Australia is inflexible for those who have teaching qualifications from a country where English is not an official language¹¹. Teaching courses across Australian teaching jurisdictions require a high level of testing for English language proficiency, over the experiential teaching practice and rigour of higher education qualifications immigrant teachers may bring¹². From this research, The University of Sydney, and the Australian Catholic University in NSW, have developed a bridging Master of Teaching Course that offers teachers with overseas qualifications and years of experience a pathway into teaching. This approach to teacher training, highlights the importance in considering the resettlement challenges of adapting to work commitments, understanding the Australian education systems and the need for bridging support that helps refugee and immigrant education students access the rigours of tertiary studies in Australia.

Through Foundation House's work supporting the [Multicultural Education Aide Support Program](#) in Victoria, there are many staff with education and professional backgrounds, performing bridging roles to student and family engagement at school. This cohort bring significant social capital which assists schools to support their refugee and immigrant communities, but they lack meaningful pathways to staying in the education profession beyond the role of MEA and family/Learning support officer, or other education support roles. Significantly, schools where MEA equivalent roles are employed, are often located in growth corridors on the outer fringes of Melbourne or in regional Victoria. These schools are experiencing considerable staffing shortages¹³. Foundation House participates in a Community of Practice to support teachers working in EAL roles in Melton (local government area in Melbourne's West). The network consists of staff from 32 government schools, but only two staff members are trained in the EAL specialisation. Additionally, in the local government area of Wyndham, one secondary school reported being down fifteen teaching positions across their school.

Foundation House believes that providing supported pathways and teacher training courses that acknowledge the significant school experience of MEAs and equivalent roles, can both support the teacher shortage gap, and develop a teacher workforce that it is representative of the student community, particularly in growth settlement areas. The example teaching course set out above, is an iteration of teacher training that should be mandated across Australia in policy and practice.

¹⁰ Gershenson, S., Hansen, M. & Lindsay, C., 2021, *Teacher Diversity and Student Success: Why Racial Representation Matters in the Classroom*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

¹¹ Cranitch, M., Sharpe, T. & Cruickshank, K., 2021, *Having a different currency? Teacher shortages and community languages teachers with overseas qualifications: Executive Summary*, The University of Sydney/Western Sydney University, https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/faculty-of-arts-and-social-sciences/research/research-centres-institutes-groups/sicle/having_a_different_currency_report.pdf

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Grace, R., 2023, *Supply strain: How high school teacher numbers will not add up*, The Age, June 25, 2023, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/supply-strain-how-high-school-teacher-numbers-will-not-add-up-20230621-p5digb.html>

Chapter 5: Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

26. Is there any data not currently collected and reported on that is vital to understanding education in Australia? Why is this data important?

Foundation House believes that there is a lack of data concerning the educational outcomes of students of refugee backgrounds. Students from this cohort have generally experienced disrupted education and may have little or no literacy in their first language. As a result, it can take them 7-12 years to reach academic parity with their English-speaking peers¹⁴. Although English proficiency is a crucial driver of EAL/D learner's student outcomes (for which new arrival refugee background students sit), their absence from the national measures such as for NAPLAN and NSRA outcomes, means there is an absence in data to identify the academic performance achievement, growth, or progress of this equity cohort.

Analysis of NAPLAN results do not adequately show educational outcomes for students of refugee backgrounds, extending to capturing the progress or underachievement of newly arrived language learners entering school¹⁵. Currently, students of refugee backgrounds and English language learners, are categorised using the Language Backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) measure. This category is very broad, covering a cohort of students with enormous diversity. The extent of literacy and numeracy achievement of the LBOTE group reflects the diverse socioeconomic characteristics of the broader population and consequently misrepresents the outcomes of EAL learners¹⁶. It is therefore difficult to accurately determine the educational outcomes of students of refugee backgrounds and that of other English language students. This data is crucial to inform appropriate policy and programming.

Foundation House acknowledges the submission offered by the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) addressing the need for a national English language proficiency measure which identifies and supports the reporting of EAL students' English language proficiency for both achievement and progress¹⁷. Considerations for benefits and risks for how refugee background students can be tracked has been covered above in Chapter 2, Question 4.

Chapter 6: Funding transparency and accountability is important for students, parents, policymakers and the community

38. What are the priority gaps in the current funding transparency and accountability arrangements from your perspective?

Foundation House believes that greater transparency and accountability regarding funding arrangements are needed across a variety of areas of the education sector. In the context of supporting students from refugee backgrounds, it is particularly important to review funding

¹⁴ Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), 2022, *Submission to the Productivity Commission: Review of the National School Reform Agreement*, July 2022,

https://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/341990/sub037-school-agreement.pdf

¹⁵ MYAN & Foundation House, 2020, *National Education Roundtable: Education and students from refugee and migrant backgrounds: Briefing Paper*, https://myan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/education_issue_05.pdf

¹⁶ Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), 2022, *Submission to the Productivity Commission: Review of the National School Reform Agreement*, July 2022,

https://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/341990/sub037-school-agreement.pdf

¹⁷ Ibid.

reporting for EAL supports. Funding for schools to assist newly arrived students to acquire English language is critical to support academic and social settlement in school.

In Victoria, EAL Index funding is often insufficient to meet the needs of schools in supporting their newly arrived students. It is allocated to schools based on the cohort of students who meet eligibility criteria. However, through our extensive work with schools, we are aware that EAL funding does not reflect the need in many schools who have significantly more EAL learners than are defined, and subsequently funded. Victorian schools are funded to support students with EAL assistance for their first 5 years in Australia. However, research indicates that students from refugee backgrounds who have experienced disrupted schooling take 7-12 years to acquire academic language proficiency.^{18, 19} We believe that the definition of EAL learner should be defined by the features of the English language learners, rather than their year of arrival. In this context, EAL funding is a valuable but limited resource for schools, and therefore there needs to be greater transparency and accountability to ensure that it is meeting the needs of those who most require assistance.

Foundation House is aware that the use of EAL funding is up to the discretion of Principals in Victoria schools, with advice from the Department of Education. This allows for the possible diversion of EAL funding without any responsibility to demonstrate how it is benefitting EAL learners. The Victorian Department of Education's annual EAL reports provide some insight into the ways that schools are allocating and utilising EAL Index funding. However, the reports are based on data from the annual Principal Survey, of which the EAL section is optional. In 2021, only about 25% of Principals completed the EAL section to report on profiles of their EAL learners and the types of their EAL programs.²⁰ The limited data set indicated that only approximately 20% of students eligible for EAL Index funding, were assessed against the EAL curriculum in their schools²¹. There is concern that schools who do not complete this section of the survey may be using funding inappropriately without any repercussions, and their staff are ill-equipped to be assessing students competently.

Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA)'s 2016 national EAL/D survey found that "dedicated EAL/D provision in schools was being substantially eroded due to school autonomy and flexible resource management policies... which resulted in a total loss of transparency in use of funding for EAL/D learners."²² The Victorian Auditor General also reported in 2020 that further transparency around input data used to determine funding through the Student Resource Package (including EAL Index funding) is needed for schools to determine their eligibility, to scrutinise funding allocations and to fully understand the implications of the data they submit.²³

Schools should be required to report some details to their communities on how they are investing resources in the students and programs that they were intended for. As members of the school

¹⁸ Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), 2022, *Submission to the Productivity Commission: Review of the National School Reform Agreement*, July 2022,

https://www.pc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/341990/sub037-school-agreement.pdf

¹⁹ Browder, C., 2018, 'Recently Resettled Refugee Students Learning English in US High Schools: The Impact of Students' Educational Backgrounds', in *Educating Refugee-Background Students*, edited by Shawna Shapiro, Raichle Farrelly, and Mary Jane Curry, 17–32, Multilingual Matters

²⁰ Victorian Department of Education, 2022, *English as an Additional Language in Victorian government schools 2021*

²¹ Ibid.

²² ACTA, 2022, *National Roadmap for English as an Additional Language or Dialect Education in Schools*, pg. 19, <https://tesol.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Roadmap-for-English-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect-in-schools-ACTA-May-2022.pdf>

²³ Victorian Auditor General's Office, 2020, *Management of the Student Resource Package*, pg., 7 <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/management-student-resource-package?section=>

community, parents/carers, students and the broader staff cohort, deserve to be kept informed about how funding is allocated at a local level and provide feedback where appropriate. This is necessary to enable funding to be utilised in line with best practice and to ensure best outcomes for students from refugee and EAL backgrounds. Clear guidance is required that balances school autonomy and the need to identify and respond to local needs with accountability for funding.