

Dear Dr O'Brien and Panel Members

## **Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (BFES)**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission which I trust provides the Review with insights required to properly inform recommendations to be made by the Panel.

This submission is informed by my background in the following areas (since I am not an educator):

a) as a parent of three children who have been educated under different systems in Australia and the US (including mainstream, Steiner/Waldorf and Montessori).

b) as someone educated in the UK and Australia

c) as a chartered accountant for 40 years, including around two decades working with [REDACTED] accounting firms to a National Director level across three sectors (audit, taxation and IT and including the delivery of training programs and computerised help systems)

d) as an entrepreneur (including a successful IT start-up); consulting to streamline processes; detailed reviews of governance structures and recent experience with IT and compliance requirements for a Steiner teacher training seminar.

e) some practical suggestions are sourced from having teachers as close family members and also from acting as a support person in a teacher dispute process.

I appreciate the opportunity to make suggestions to help inform a better and fairer education system. I understand that Panel members are keen to hear about approaches that have been proven to support student learning and wellbeing and how these could be applied.

After some introductory remarks, I propose to submit comments in relation to four of the five key areas in which the Panel has been tasked to deliver recommendations in the order in which those areas appear in the Consultation Paper (CP). Given the number of submissions likely to be made by others, I have kept my comments as brief as possible and would be pleased to elaborate if desired.

This submission is made in my personal capacity and may not reflect the views of any organisation with whom I've been connected.

Specific comments appear under headings for the four key areas covered further below, however the following remarks in this Introduction segment have broad application covering either some or all of the areas of interest to the Panel.

### **Risk of misdirection through a piecemeal approach**

It is understandable why the key areas for review have been separated, however this risks giving the impression that the separate parts can be treated in isolation from a complex multilayered and multifaceted system. This risks missing the underlying cause(s) of unsatisfactory outcomes.

For example, I note that the CP makes clear that wellbeing and learning cannot be decoupled, however by its presentation as separate topics it appears to assume that the issues may be addressed separately and/or independently. One of the comments below provides examples of how they may be integrated in practice

Another example is the approach taken with attracting, teaching and retaining teachers. I note that other initiatives such as ITE reform have been conducted in parallel, similar to other programs mentioned in the CP. What is not highlighted through such presentation is the interplay between a well designed and well delivered curriculum. In other words, there exists a risk that improved initial teacher training recommended under ITE reform based on the current curriculum could be counter-productive if this Review finds that the current curriculum requires significant changes in content (especially if the content requires a different approach to delivery).

The point here is not to deny that having sufficient well-trained teachers is an important consideration in student outcomes, but rather to recognise that attempting to deal with ITE issues in a standalone way introduces a layer of risk.

In short, as an interested observer of the Education sector from the outside, my concern is that research and reform initiatives may not give due recognition to the fact that education is a highly complex and multifaceted system whose results primarily depend on the overall system design.

Similar to a human who is ailing with comorbidities, the complicated interactions between key systems within the whole of that person's being must normally be considered to achieve the desired healing.

A key question to be asked is whether the existing education system rests on a strong foundation which only requires some tinkering to achieve the desired outcomes.

Alternatively, does the present system lack fundamental features which are vital to delivering the outcomes we all hope to achieve? In this case, further tinkering could potentially add to the difficulties of finding a true solution.

I comment in more detail on this further below.

### **Expert Panel Constitution**

I don't question the competence and good intentions of the expert panel members, however it is notable that the panel is dominated by persons with deep backgrounds in the education sector. This raises a risk factor for the review pointed out by [REDACTED]

██████ being that the human condition makes it difficult to solve problems from within a system which gave rise to them.

If I may, I'd like to suggest that the Panel gives consideration to adding a member from outside of the education sector (preferably a person having significant experience in designing and implementing process improvements).

### **Lifting student outcomes**

The CP provides a good outline of the difficulties in sourcing 'good' data to inform the decisions required in order to achieve better student outcomes, especially in relation to longitudinal studies in a multifaceted system. This is an unfortunate reality found in practically all areas of life, where decisions are invariably required based on incomplete information.

The key issue under this topic is defining what constitutes a desired outcome. This definition would then inform a consideration of other areas of concern such as what data needs to be collected to drive and measure performance against those outcomes.

Section 1 of the CP points to key desired features being:

- Successful lifelong learners
- Strong literacy
- Strong numeracy
- Ability to think creatively
- Ability to think logically
- Ability to be inquisitive
- Ability to adapt to new ways
- Inspired by the education received
- Ability to improve from formal and informal learning.

To these we could add (as examples):

- A feeling of wellbeing
- A feeling of having meaningful relationships with others
- An ability to work and interact with others in a positive cooperative way
- A sense of self assurance
- A feeling of being connected with the world
- A feeling of confidence
- A feeling of being in a supportive (if not loving) environment
- A feeling of being appreciated as a unique individual
- A feeling of preparedness to deal with all that the future may bring without fear or anxiety
- A feeling that they live in a world of beauty of which they are an integral part
- A feeling that they can hold and practice a belief system around their reason for being in complete freedom
- A feeling that their intellectual curiosity has not been limited through a focus on vocational considerations.

The above are examples to illustrate a starting point for a possible approach to remediation which considers education at a systems level and may be outlined as follows.

1. Agree on the desired outcomes such as those listed above.
2. Compare existing systems in use around the world to short list the systems which would (prima facie) most closely approximate the desired outcomes.
3. Examine existing research around a potential alternative systems if data is available. If data is not available, then commence a research program aimed at obtaining the desired data, recognising however that the absence of hard data need not prevent changes being made if common sense dictates otherwise.
4. Compare the existing mainstream system with the potential ideal and consider what aspects could be adopted either in the short term or over an extended period.

It is not my intention here to try to "sell" any particular alternate system or education approach, however I believe it is useful to take the Waldorf system as an example of how an alternative system may be considered.

As broad background, Waldorf has existed for around 100 years and delivers an integrated and holistic education designed to provide a balanced development of human intellectual and cognitive faculties, artistic and imaginative capacities, socio-emotional development and practical life skills. There are around 50 Steiner schools in Australia, including mainstream schools who operate under a dual system where mainstream and the Steiner Framework curricula are covered. I understand that more than 3,000 schools/kindergartens in 65 countries use the Waldorf pedagogy.

Over recent years, many features of Waldorf have been adopted in the mainstream approach such as:

- Wellbeing - the focus is on the whole being of the child and not just their intellect
- Narrative - where storytelling is interwoven through all aspects of content delivery
- Kinaesthetic learning - movement and rhythms feature through the program, especially during the later parts of the day
- Deep learning - the 'main lesson' delivery occurs during the morning when the intellect is fresh and over a period of several weeks
- Communities of practice - in Waldorf schools, a flat management structure allows decision-making by the school college on a collaborative basis.

These are just a few example to illustrate the potential to leverage other aspects of such a long-standing and popular system since its curriculum is already recognised by ACARA, and there is nothing about its content or delivery which would prevent widespread adoption over time since it is non secular and suits the needs of all cultures as is evident by its adoption in around 65 countries. Although it is presently

delivered under the independent system, there are no particular factors which would inhibit mainstream adoption (eg it does not require expensive facilities).

### **Gifted students**

The CP provides examples of categories of students who are not reaching their full learning potential under the present system. I'd like to suggest that gifted students be specifically mentioned in the list of priority equity cohorts since they are likely to form a significant proportion and they too have special needs.

### **Attendance and behaviour**

I would suggest that attendance and behavioural issues would fall once the required changes to content and delivery methods are addressed and implemented since student engagement is a key factor. Recent media reports around a school in Victoria which achieved above average outcomes despite having challenging cohorts confirms this.

### **Improving student mental health and wellbeing**

As the CP states very clearly, wellbeing and learning cannot be decoupled.

As mentioned above, other education approaches such as Steiner adopt a holistic approach and there is no reason why this cannot be leveraged for mainstream.

A practical factor of teacher overload highlighted in the CP suggests that the existing chaplaincy program be extended and/or enhanced to allow delivery of the needed assistance. Under the original Waldorf system, schools would employ a doctor or nurse as part of staff, however this is presently less common for reasons I'm not aware of.

A suggestion I received from a practicing teacher is that including more outdoor education programs greatly improves student wellbeing and other factors such as self-reliance, building resilience, leadership skills and social skills in a non competitive way (ie no stress environment).

### **Attracting and retaining teachers**

Five brief comments come to mind in relation to attracting and retaining teachers.

First is setting remuneration at a level which matches demand with supply. This is the main method underlying our market based economy and generally works very well.

Second is giving greater consideration to utilising the skills and wisdom of experienced individuals in many vocations whose life experience and enthusiasm

could inspire the young people of today. This is not to deny that teaching requires special skills, however it was not too long ago that many successful people walking around today were successfully educated and inspired by people who were not obliged to go through the current registration process.

The third and most important comment under this topic is the recognition of the disturbing levels of harassment/bullying/intimidation of teachers which has been widely reported in the media. This affects a great number of teachers and indirectly affects their students.

From my experience as a support person for a victim, I can share some remarks in general terms to assist a better understanding of the playbook commonly adopted which allows such unfortunate behaviours to continue with apparent impunity. Here is an outline:

1. A person in power such as a principal takes an unjustified dislike to a teacher (eg using an unwarranted bad performance evaluation)
2. The teacher makes a complaint to the offending principal who obviously will dismiss the complaint
3. The complaint is escalated to a director who then refers the teacher back to the principal
4. The teacher escalates the complaint to include the director for unreasonably referring the teacher back to the oppressor
5. The teacher is told that there are no issues with the director's decision which has now been ratified by the highest level of line management.
6. There is no possibility of the teacher receiving an impartial review (at least for teachers working for the [REDACTED]) since it requires action by the [REDACTED] which may or may not side with the teacher.

I can provide more details on a confidential basis if required, however the key recommendation is to ensure that teachers have a clearly enforceable right to an impartial review which is carried out by persons outside of line management and preferably by an authority external to the relevant Approved Authority governing the teacher's employment.

Another comment relating to teachers is not to load teachers with work which is not part of their core function - let them have the time required to focus on their students since without a deep understanding of each child's needs (which requires more time than presently allowed), it is unlikely that any program exists which would result in better outcomes.

Finally on teachers, I would applaud the suggestion in the CP whereby preparation of the curriculum content is dealt with centrally and not reinvented (ie changed) every year since little is gained through putting teachers through the time and frustration this entails.

## **Data collection**

The main suggestion I'd like to make here is to recognise that sometimes the most important data is not what can be reflected on a computer screen.

When my wife and I conducted our own research, we were fortunate to be able to consider all the systems then available.

We could not locate any useful data, so we visited the schools at open days, fetes, end-of-year ceremonies, school drama productions etc.

We were simply astonished at the tangible differences in the outcomes of the different systems on offer, and I would suggest that those significant differences would not have been apparent through a data collection.

On this basis, coming back to my initial observation around the complexity of the education process and difficulty of collecting useful data to make reliable decisions, I would suggest investing time in a scientific way to gain the insights that only physical observations can uncover. This also goes for assessing teacher performance so that their cohorts can be properly considered in any performance assessment

## **Conclusion**

I wish the Panel well in conducting its inquiries and formulating recommendations for a better and fairer education system.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any queries on this submission.

I confirm that I have no issues with this submission being published under my name but excluding my personal contact details.

Yours sincerely

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