

## **Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Submission from the Institute of Special Educators (InSpEd)**

### **Opening Comments**

1. Given it is stated that the reforms included in the next iteration of the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) are focussed on those who are most at risk of falling behind (including students with disabilities and learning difficulties), we are concerned that there is not a person with special education qualifications and experience on the Expert Panel. This appears to us to be a lost opportunity to include expertise in this area. We would request, therefore, that this issue be addressed initially to provide the necessary input and accountability.
2. Our 2022 submission, following the release of the review of the NSRA, noted that initial teacher education programs have been found to be wanting in relation to evidence-based literacy and numeracy content and evidence-based behaviour management strategies (e.g., Buckingham & Meeks, 2019; Meeks et al., 2016; Meeks & Stephenson, 2020; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011, 2014). We, therefore, support the decision of the federal government to insist that universities provide their teacher education students with practical, evidence-based strategies to equip them with the challenging task of educating Australian children. We are also concerned that, like the courses for initial teacher training, universities do not always include content relating to evidence-based practice in their postgraduate special education programs (Stephenson et al., 2022, 2023).
3. Research investigating the content of courses that purported to prepare Australian primary school teachers to support students with additional needs in mainstream settings suggested that such courses were not generally taught by instructors with an interest in the area of special education and that the content was generally not advertised as being evidence-based (Stephenson et al., 2012). This underlines the importance of having qualified specialist teachers not only in special schools and classes but also in mainstream schools where they are needed to assist teachers to provide a quality education for those students with disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties in regular education classrooms.

As a national not-for-profit organisation with the aim of improving the quality of education for students with intellectual disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the areas for comment identified by the Review's Expert Panel.

### **Targets and reforms that need to be included in the next NSRA to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a particular focus on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance**

Our focus for a response to this question is **students with intellectual disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties**. These are the students whom education systems and schools are often failing. These students come from all sections of society but are likely to be over-

represented in disadvantaged communities. While acknowledging this, the focus should be educational need and not community category. For example, not all Indigenous students or students from low socio economic or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities have disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

Given InSpEd's earlier stated concerns that regular education teachers are not generally well prepared to provide instructional support to students with disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties, two important reforms need to be made:

### *1. Content of Initial Teacher Education Programs*

- a. All teachers should complete an initial program of study that addresses:
  - i. evidence-based instructional practice including explicit and systematic instruction; and
  - ii. in the case of primary educators, content that includes prerequisite skills for achieving early literacy and numeracy
- b. All teachers should complete an initial program of study that includes evidence-based strategies in classroom and behaviour management.
- c. All teachers should be given the:
  - i. knowledge and skills to understand and deliver a multi-tiered approach to providing instruction to all students; and
  - ii. skills to work collaboratively with families, specialist teachers and para-professionals to implement this approach.

### *2. Employment of Specialist Staff*

- a. Even if all teachers are provided with the knowledge and skills listed above, they will still need the support of specialist staff, particularly for those students who fall into the top tier (most intensive) of a multi-tiered approach. Teachers struggling with students in the top tier are likely to need support from a specialist teacher who has completed a postgraduate degree in special education. Having knowledge of evidence-based instruction and behaviour management would ensure that classroom teachers have a shared knowledge that would enable them to work collaboratively and more effectively with specialist teachers in the development and management of individual programs, where necessary, and the supervision of para-professional staff.
- b. A necessary target, therefore, should be for **every school to employ a full-time special education teacher**. The achievement of a target of this nature would have **obvious benefits for classroom teachers and their students with and without special education needs**. This teacher would either be qualified by having completed an endorsed postgraduate special education qualification or be enrolled in such a course. Special educators are better able to identify evidence-based practices and non-evidence-based behavioural interventions and are more confident in their ability to select interventions (Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011). Special educators in the United States and Australia have been found to have more positive attitudes to students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Hsien et al., 2009; Klehm, 2014). A study by Ballis and Heath (2021) in the United States used student data to demonstrate the negative effects of reducing special education support in the State of Texas.

- c. The work of teachers who are working in specialist roles but are not qualified (i.e., are still completing a qualification) should be supervised by a qualified special education teacher (perhaps from a nearby regular or special school).

## **How the next agreement can contribute to improving student mental health and wellbeing, by addressing in-school factors while acknowledging the impact of non-school factors on wellbeing**

### *1. Mental Health Issues for Students with Significant Learning Difficulties*

It is not unknown for students with significant learning difficulties to reach secondary school with very low reading ages. Imagine that young 15-year-old with a reading age of six, embarrassed to read out loud when asked to do so by his Year 9 English teacher. In many cases, these students have low self-esteem and resist going to school for fear of being teased or bullied. The long-term damage to mental health in these circumstances can be profound. Using technology to allow students with significant learning difficulties to access the curriculum (i.e., audio books and speech to print technology) is an important first step to ensuring that students are appropriately included. However, remedial instruction is still important for ensuring long term achievement. Again, specialist support in secondary schools is an essential support for students with this level of instructional need.

### *2. Mental Health Issues for Students with Behaviour Difficulties*

We note that in the consultation paper (page 19) it is stated that “students who do not engage with classroom learning or are disruptive in class are more likely to perform poorly in reading and numeracy than their more productive peers”. Students with behaviour difficulties often have learning difficulties, which are likely to contribute to these poor outcomes. Indeed, one of the strategies for supporting students with behaviour difficulties is to ensure that they are succeeding academically. Students will make academic gains if instruction is at the right level, effective (i.e., evidence-based) instructional strategies are employed, and progress towards successful outcomes is measured and monitored. Academic success will contribute to an improvement in confidence and self-esteem, which in turn is likely to contribute to better mental health.

## **How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers**

### ***Changes Needed to Attract More Students Into the Teaching Profession***

#### *1. Reinstatement of a Scholarship Program for Trainee Teachers*

When there was a teacher shortage in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarships were provided for both teachers college and university placements in teacher education programs. Many high school graduates at the time (including some on the InSpEd Board) took up these scholarships in preference to the Commonwealth Scholarships that were also on offer. This meant that many of the top high school graduates elected to become teachers, even though medicine and the law may also have been on offer. Because the scholarship covered the university fees, a book allowance and a living allowance, this meant that many high school graduates from poorer and disadvantaged communities were able to go to college or university when this might not have been the case without these scholarships. Graduates of these supported placements were also bonded to departments of education for two to five

years depending on the length of the course. We would strongly recommend the reinstatement of scholarships supporting initial teacher education, not just because they would enable disadvantaged students to complete teacher training but also because it would attract high performing students across the board to take up a teaching career.

## *2. Professionalising the Teaching Profession*

Having a scholarship program is only a first step towards raising the status of teachers, which has implications for both attracting students to the profession and retaining them. Paying teachers more may attract some to the profession but payment is unlikely to be the most important consideration (Meeks et al., 2014). Meeks et al., found that student achievement on international tests of literacy and numeracy was higher in countries in which a teaching career had a higher status. This was achieved, in part by ensuring that only high achieving high school graduates were accepted into teacher education programs and in part by ensuring that teachers were supported as professionals once they entered the profession.

## ***Changes Needed to Support Teachers to Remain in the Profession***

### *1. Preparation for the Role*

Many teachers report negative experiences in their first years of employment. They commonly feel unprepared for the role and undervalued by both the system and the community. If teachers are to be retained in the system, their teaching experiences must be positive. In order to achieve this, we would suggest the following:

- a. Ensure that teacher education courses cover the relevant content and evidence-based pedagogy.
- b. Establish a teacher internship under the supervision of a highly skilled teacher coach as part of the teacher preparation program. Trainee teachers could work as paid interns in schools in their last year of study before being employed as teachers. At the same time, they would continue to participate in tutorials and complete practical assignments, thereby integrating theory, research and practice. In this way they have time to develop skills needed to work independently with guidance.

### *2. Support for the Role*

- a. Provide additional staff to reduce the administrative burden on teachers while at the same time allowing additional time for collaboration with families and specialists both within and outside the education system.
- b. Provide easy access to specialist staff, including qualified special education support staff, where needed. Given that up to 25% of students may have difficulties in the areas of literacy and numeracy by Year 9, as identified in the consultation paper (page 13), specialist staff would not only provide the necessary support for classroom teachers but would also provide them with valuable professional collaborative experiences.

### *3. Professional Opportunities*

- a. Engagement in ongoing professional learning should be encouraged and supported. This should include not only one-off courses but also formal specialised courses relating to either academic content or specialist pedagogy.

- b. Opportunities to engage in relevant applied research within the school should be provided. This may also offer opportunities to work with academics who may in turn provide additional expertise to the school. Both the school and the academics would benefit with opportunities for sharing of knowledge and publication of research.

### **The Use of data to inform decision-making, boost student outcomes and demonstrate accountability for the investment of funds.**

#### *1. Data Collected by Teachers for Teachers*

- a. In relation to students with disabilities and learning and behaviour difficulties, the most important data are the performance data collected initially by teachers for the purpose of designing appropriate programs and the ongoing data that they collect for monitoring progress towards the goals and objectives set for students. These data can also be used for reporting progress to parents, the school executive and the state education authorities.
- b. *Data collected by Teachers and Specialist Staff and Schools to Report Progress to the Federal Government.*

##### *i. Student Level Data*

These will include formal norm and criterion-referenced assessments of academic skills. In the case of students with significant intellectual disabilities it may include measures of engagement, as engagement is an important prerequisite for learning and students will not be engaged if the instruction is not at the right level. They may also include parent and teacher surveys demonstrating (a) levels of collaboration between the school and the family, and (b) satisfaction with the progress made.

##### *ii. System Level Data*

Clearly there is a need for greater level of reporting from all education systems, government and non-government, for funded programs. One principle that should be adopted for the future is that detailed information should include current systemic information and new or additional information that results from Commonwealth additional funding. Such an approach should be clearly related to state level accountability requirements.

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The Institute of Special Educators Limited (ABN 30 622 970 549) has been established under its constitution as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. Its principal object is to improve the quality of Special Education provision in Australia.

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