

# Recommendations to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation (NTLC)



## Background

- The Northern Territory Learning Commission (NTLC) is a unique initiative in Australia that fosters collaboration between schools, the Department of Education, and students. It empowers students as "partners in learning" and has grown significantly since 2016, now representing over half of young Territorians in public schools.
- The NTLC has achieved positive outcomes, evident in increased positive perception survey responses in areas such as transitions, wellbeing, and teacher-student relationships. It spans diverse settings, including small, remote, urban, primary, middle, senior secondary, distance education, and special education schools, benefiting over 17,000 Territory students.
- The initiative improves student outcomes through data analysis and student-led recommendations, covering diverse settings, including remote and urban schools. It contributes directly to strategy development at the school, region and system level, has been recognised for its innovative approach and is evaluated regularly to ensure continuous improvement. The NTLC's success lies in its commitment to student engagement and leadership, making it a model for best practices in the public sector.
- The NTLC's unique pedagogy of 'students as partners in their learning' distinguishes it and has drawn recognition at national and international forums. The initiative is subject to rigorous evaluation, with findings highlighting enhanced student voice, agency, leadership, and improvements in critical outcomes such as writing, reading growth, and inclusion
- Community engagement and stakeholder consultation are integral to the NTLC's success. It originated as a partnership between principals, teachers, and students and has evolved into a system-wide and nationally recognised way of deeply engaging students as partners in learning. The initiative receives support from various partners,

including the 'The Eventful Learning Co,' 'PIVOT,' 'Evidence for Learning,' 'Australian Council for Educational Research,' and 'Google for Education.' These organisations who work with system to deliver the NTLC are known as "The Partners".

- The Partners commend the Expert Panel for a well-developed paper that discusses the challenges of the current education system; and presents opportunities to help address these in the next National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA).
- This submission has been co-written by Summer Howarth from The Eventful Learning Co on behalf of "The Partners", informed by teachers, principals and student commissioners of 2023.
- The submission is also co-written by Mr. John Cleary, specifically in his capacity as a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Melbourne, Graduate School of Education; and within a current research focus to deepen an understanding in the field of a 'Pedagogy for Student Partnership in School Improvement'. Specifically, the factors students and educators participating in the NT Learning Commission model identify as being transformative in nature.

Our submission provides responses to:

- **2.5 The role of the next NSRA in improving student outcomes**
  - How can the targets in the next NSRA be structured to ensure that evidence-based approaches underpin a nationally coherent reform agenda while allowing jurisdictions and schools the flexibility to respond to individual student circumstances and needs?
- **3.1.3 Schools play an important part in the wellbeing of students, particularly when it comes to belonging**
  - What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government and the community to deliver this?
- **4.1 Attracting and retaining teachers is a critical issue**
  - Are there examples of resources, such as curriculum materials, being used to improve teacher workload or streamline their administrative tasks?
- **5.1 Data collection and reporting can improve our understanding of system performance and help lift student outcomes**
  - Is there data collected by schools, systems, sectors or jurisdictions that could be made more available to inform policy design and implementation? What systems would be necessary to make this data available safely and efficiently?

## The Partners of the NT Learning Commission (NTLC) offers the following recommendations to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation

### 2.5 The role of the next NSRA in improving student outcomes

To ensure evidence-based approaches underpin a nationally coherent reform agenda while allowing flexibility for individual student circumstances and needs, the targets in the next NSRA should be designed with the following considerations:

- **Evidence-Based Strategies:** Each target should be accompanied by evidence-based strategies proven to be effective in achieving the desired outcomes, with students as partners in this aspect of the decision-making process. These strategies can be informed by successful initiatives like the NT Learning Commission (NTLC) that emphasise data analysis, student engagement, and shared evidence-based decision-making in schools.
- **Flexibility in Implementation:** While national core targets are essential, the NSRA should allow jurisdictions and schools the flexibility to adapt the evidence-based strategies to suit their unique student circumstances and needs. This flexibility enables tailored interventions and approaches based on local contexts, in partnership with teachers, leaders and students.
- **Continuous Improvement Framework:** The NSRA should emphasise a continuous improvement framework, encouraging jurisdictions and schools to regularly review their progress, learn from their experiences, and adjust strategies accordingly. Sharing best practices and lessons learned across jurisdictions can enhance coherence in the reform agenda. The NTLC uses a continuous improvement model to maintain momentum and connection to school & system improvement plans.
- **Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:** Encouraging collaboration between jurisdictions, schools, and educational experts fosters the sharing of best practices, research, and innovations. This exchange of knowledge can enrich the evidence base and contribute to a more coherent reform agenda. Mechanisms such as the National Student Voice Council can be useful in this knowledge exchange.

By structuring the targets in this manner, the next NSRA can strike a balance between a nationally coherent reform agenda underpinned by evidence-based approaches while allowing the flexibility required to address individual student circumstances and needs effectively. The NTLC's success and focus as students being true partners in their learning can serve as a valuable model for incorporating evidence-based practices into the NSRA while promoting educational improvement at all levels.

### 3.1.3 Schools play an important part in the wellbeing of students, particularly when it comes to belonging

When a school is effectively supporting student mental health and well-being, it fosters a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment where students feel valued, heard, and cared for. The NT Learning Commission (NTLC) provides valuable insights on how schools can achieve this:

- **Student Engagement:** An effective school promotes student engagement and involvement in decision-making processes, as seen in the NTLC's "students as partners in learning" approach. Students are encouraged to share their experiences, concerns, and ideas, allowing the school to tailor support based on their needs.
- **Data-Informed Approach:** Schools need to collect and analyse data on student well-being and mental health regularly. This can involve conducting surveys, tracking attendance, monitoring social-emotional development, and identifying at-risk students. The NTLC's emphasis on data-driven strategies can be a valuable guide for schools in this aspect.
- **Holistic Support:** Effective support goes beyond reactive measures and addresses the whole student. The NTLC's focus on comprehensive student outcomes, including well-being and social-emotional skills, aligns with this approach.
- **Partnerships:** Collaboration among schools, systems, government agencies, and the community is vital. Schools can partner with a range of organisations, local agencies, and carers to create a network of support for students. The NTLC's engagement with various stakeholders demonstrates the value of collaborative efforts.
- **Long-Term Commitment:** Promoting student shared decision-making is an ongoing effort that requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. Government policies, system-level initiatives, and continuous support for schools can create a conducive environment for long-term ways that schools partner with students; contributing to a sense of belonging and connection in a shared and committed improvement initiative.

### 4.1 Attracting and retaining teachers is a critical issue

there are examples of resources being used by the NT Learning Commission (NTLC) to improve teacher workload and streamline administrative tasks. The NTLC's approach of engaging students as partners in their learning and using data-driven strategies can indirectly contribute to alleviating some of the teacher workload and administrative burden. Here's how:

- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** The NTLC's emphasis on data-driven decision-making allows schools to identify areas needing improvement and inform targeted interventions. By using data effectively, schools can identify students' specific needs and allocate resources more efficiently, which can lead to more streamlined administrative processes.
- **Student-Driven Improvement Initiatives:** The NTLC's model involves students and teachers collaboratively working on improvement initiatives in schools. As students take an active role in analysing trends in whole school data and providing recommendations for improvement, teachers can focus on facilitating and guiding this process rather than taking sole responsibility for all improvement initiatives.
- **Reducing Administrative Tasks:** When schools engage students in improvement efforts, students become partners in learning and are involved in the design and measurement of impact. This means teachers can delegate some administrative tasks related to data analysis and improvement planning to student commissioners, thereby reducing the burden on teachers.
- **Professional Development and Support:** The NTLC's approach includes ongoing professional development for teachers. This support can equip teachers with skills and knowledge to streamline administrative processes and manage their workload effectively.
- **Student-Driven Learning Design:** The involvement of students in the NTLC's curriculum and improvement design initiatives allows for an approach to education that values students as partners; sharing the 'load'. When student needs and interests are co-designed with the learner, teachers can better align their instructional strategies, potentially leading to increased engagement and reduced workload related to adapting content or materials.

While the NTLC primarily focuses on improving student outcomes, the partnership approach and emphasis on data-driven strategies indirectly contributes to enhancing the work environment for teachers. By actively involving students in improvement efforts and leveraging data effectively, the NTLC's model can potentially lead to a more streamlined approach to administrative tasks, which may ease the teacher workload in the long run. However, it is essential to recognise that the primary goal of the NTLC is to improve student outcomes, and any reduction in teacher workload is a positive byproduct of this approach.

## 5.1 Data collection and reporting can improve our understanding of system performance and help lift student outcomes

The NT Learning Commission (NTLC) uses and collects valuable data from schools, systems, sectors, and jurisdictions that could be made more available to inform policy design and implementation. The NTLC's approach of engaging students as partners in their learning and using data-driven strategies generates a wealth of information on student outcomes, school performance, and improvement initiatives. Here are some ways the data collected by the NTLC could be utilised to inform policy design and implementation:

- **Student Outcome Data:** The NTLC collects and uses data for inquiry into improving student outcomes, including academic performance, attendance rates, and well-being. This data and resulting inquiry around it is used to identify trends and disparities among different student groups, helping policymakers design targeted interventions to support students at risk of falling behind.
- **Effectiveness of Strategies:** As the NTLC implements evidence-based practices for improving student outcomes, the data collected can offer insights into the effectiveness of various strategies. Policymakers can use this information to scale up successful practices and refine policies accordingly.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** The data collected by the NTLC inquiry process can shed light on equity gaps and the experiences of vulnerable student populations, such as Young Carers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and culturally and linguistically diverse students. This information can guide the development of inclusive policies to address disparities.

By leveraging the data collected by or the use of collected system data by the NTLC, and implementing these systems, policymakers can develop evidence-based and data-informed policies that address the most critical challenges in education and promote positive student outcomes across the Northern Territory and if scaled, across Australia.

### In Conclusion.

The Northern Territory Learning Commission (NTLC) offers valuable insights and recommendations that can inform the development of a more effective and equitable education system through the next National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA). As a unique initiative, the NTLC has demonstrated positive outcomes in fostering collaboration among schools, the Department of Education, External Partners and students. Its focus on

evidence-based strategies, flexibility, continuous improvement, and collaboration sets a precedent for scalable education reform.

To improve student outcomes, the next NSRA should incorporate evidence-based strategies alongside core targets. Allowing flexibility for jurisdictions and schools to adapt these strategies to their unique circumstances will ensure a coherent reform agenda while catering to individual student needs.

The NTLC's emphasis on student engagement and data-driven decision-making has proven effective in supporting student well-being. Schools can benefit from regular data collection and analysis to identify areas needing improvement and inform targeted interventions.

Attracting and retaining teachers is a critical issue, and the NTLC's approach of involving students in improvement initiatives indirectly contributes to easing teacher workload. Teachers engaged in his partnership with students report the positive effect of this engagement in decisions to remain at their current school, or within the profession more broadly. Professional development and support can further streamline administrative tasks and promote a positive work environment as well as providing additional leadership pathways for middle and senior leaders in schools.

Data collection and reporting are essential for understanding system performance and enhancing student outcomes. The data collected by the NTLC can serve as a valuable resource for policymakers in designing evidence-based and data-informed policies to address disparities and uplift vulnerable student populations.

By embracing the scalable approach of the NTLC, the next NSRA can foster a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration in education. Incorporating best practices from the NTLC will contribute to a more effective, inclusive, and supportive education system for all students across the Northern Territory and potentially beyond.



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