

# **Response to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System offers a welcome opportunity to broaden the ways in which equity is defined and measured in Australian education. Current equity measures are limited and largely focused on outcomes, rather than the quality of student experience. Further, current targets and measures puts added and undue pressures on schools that are already under-resourced in supporting disadvantaged students. Policy levers are needed to support schools that do the heaviest lifting in promoting equity, and improve the conditions under which these schools operate. A clear pathway to address student experience and equity is the promotion of more socially diverse schools to enact a better and fairer education system and society.

The University of South Australia (UniSA) has a long tradition of research and partnerships with systems and schools that has generated strong evidence in relation to socially just education.

Pioneering work has been undertaken by UniSA researchers on the learning conditions of working-class schools and neighbourhoods, and on pedagogies that recognise and promote positive relationships between teachers and students. This work includes the turn-around pedagogies for struggling students reported by Professor Barbara Comber and colleagues, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies that are at the heart of projects led by Professors Robert Hattam and Lester-Irabinna Rigney (see, for example, Comber & Kamler, 2004; Rigney, 2023). This body of research points to the importance of recognising the dignity and identities of students and their communities, and the importance of teacher professional autonomy.

The University of South Australia is also actively engaged in promoting equity in transitions from school to university, including through non-traditional pathways and enabling programs. It has one the most socially diverse student populations of any Australian university, including 25% of students from low socioeconomic status or disadvantaged backgrounds and 46% from families where parents' education did not exceed Year 12.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this submission is to argue for policy levers that seek to reduce the segregation of Australian schools by socio-economic background. We see the introduction of targeted policy as a priority for the next National School Reform Agreement. Rather than responding to all 38 questions raised in the Consultation Paper, this submission focuses on the following key questions:

- What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)? (Question 1)
- 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? (Question 8)
- What additional reforms are needed to ensure that the schools most in need can support and retain highly effective teachers? (Question 18)
- Is there a need to establish a report which tracks progress on the targets and reforms in the next NSRA? Should it report at a jurisdictional and a national level? What should be included in the report? (Question 29)
- What are the priority gaps in the current funding transparency and accountability arrangements from your perspective? (Question 38)

## **BACKGROUND**

Australian education policy has been driven by models of school efficacy based on parental choice, competition between schools, and centralisation of curriculum and testing. This policy landscape has exacerbated inequalities in the resourcing of schools and in the responsibilities that schools have to government and communities. Current accountability arrangements frame inequality as a problem for poorly performing schools and for equity groups defined by disadvantage in isolation.

An alternative perspective, advocated here, is to understand fairness in terms of (1) rights for all children and young people and (2) responsibilities that must be upheld by the state. This perspective aligns with rights-based equity agendas historically developed in Australia (Rigney, 2016; Windle & Fensham, 2022) and internationally. Recent international advances include the Abidjan Principles (<https://www.abidjanprinciples.org/>) that serve as a reference point for governments, educators and education providers when debating the respective roles and duties of states and private actors in education. Abidjan Principle 26 specifies that:

States must ensure that their laws, policies, or practices do not directly or indirectly discriminate in education. They must also address any situation breaching the rights to equality and non-discrimination with regards to the right to education, whether or not such situation results from their acts, including ... segregation in the education system that is discriminatory on any prohibited ground, in particular socio-economic disadvantage.

With this principle in mind, the most important issue that a new NSRA must address is social segregation within Australia's school systems. The Consultation Paper (section 2.4.1) notes that: (1) Australia has one of the highest concentrations of students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in schools with students from similar backgrounds; and (2) this concentration is growing at the second fastest rate across all OECD countries. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform better in socially mixed schools, and the influence of school composition on student achievement is just as important as individual socioeconomic background. Segregation may also have negative effects on attendance, behaviour and teachers' work. The OECD (2018) report that informs the discussion in this section of the Consultation

Paper notes that countries should aim to ‘reduce the concentration of disadvantaged students in particular schools’ (p. 3).

## **RESPONSES TO KEY QUESTIONS**

***Question 1: What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?***

Every Australian student should attend a school with a broad social mix of students, and which is connected to its local community. To address the negative impact of social segregation on student outcomes, the following should be measured and reported on:

- *peer effects on student outcomes* (student performance by socioeconomic quartile across schools by socioeconomic quartile). This measure will focus attention on the benefits of reducing segregation to improve student outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students. Individual measures of performance, attendance or engagement do not provide sufficient insight into a key driver of poor student outcomes in Australia’s schools.
- *proportion of students attending non-selective schooling*. This involves measuring the prevalence of enrolment practices that promote segregation in each State and Territory jurisdiction (e.g. use of student grades or test results prior to enrolment; use of specialist programs to selectively recruit; charging of fees, etc.).
- *proportion of enrolled students who attend a school in their local neighbourhood*. This will provide a measure of the health of community-school relations and of the prevalence of the phenomenon of advantaged students by-passing local schools, which research suggests, contributes to residualising public schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016).

***Question 8: 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?***

A 'healthy' school is one that is socially mixed and connected to its local community. Schools that support mental health and wellbeing is culturally responsive to the communities it serves, and serves the full spectrum of local communities, including students with special needs. These schools work with the whole community and other groups, services and institutions, including universities, to create a supportive place for learning and secure transitions. This creates a strong sense of belonging for students, which is correlated with improved performance and increased likelihood of undertaking university study. The OECD (2019a) notes that ‘students in socio- economically advantaged schools reported a greater sense of belonging at school than students in disadvantaged schools’ (p.32). and in Australian schools, students in advantaged, metropolitan, and private schools report a greater sense of belonging than students in disadvantaged, rural and public schools.

A school that promotes mental health and wellbeing also provides high levels of support and autonomy for staff to work effectively and respectfully with students, including prioritising student and staff relationships over administrative and compliance requirements. Moreover, these schools promote learning cultures in which high-stakes test preparation is not prioritised and there are multiple opportunities for successful pathways through education.

Support for student mental health and wellbeing is incompatible with legal discrimination practiced against LGBTQ+ students and staff in private schools, as well as other forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, pregnancy and marital status. The most egregious manifestations of segregation in Australian schooling are those that expose and exclude students and staff on grounds that are not acceptable or legal elsewhere in society.

***Question 18: What additional reforms are needed to ensure that the schools most in need can support and retain highly effective teachers?***

Social segregation in Australian schools, and the policy and funding levers that drive it, also contribute to the disproportional concentration of experienced, expert teachers in advantaged schools and the significant churn and teacher shortage in disadvantaged schools. While recognising that geographical location affects the capacity of rural and regional schools to attract and retain teachers, the OECD (2019b) reports that in Australia ‘34% of students enrolled in a disadvantaged school ... attend a school whose principal reported that the capacity of the school to provide instruction is hindered at least to some extent by a lack of teaching staff’ (p.6). This compares to 3% for advantaged students.

Reducing the concentration of disadvantaged students in particular schools, and thus the concentration of students with more complex needs in schools that are not properly resourced to meet these needs, can reduce the demands on teachers in these schools and, in turn, help to address the challenge of attracting and retaining teachers.

***Question 29: Is there a need to establish a report which tracks progress on the targets and reforms in the next NSRA? Should it report at a jurisdictional and a national level? What should be included in the report? (Question 29)***

To address the critical problem of social segregation in Australia’s school systems, we need jurisdiction and national level reporting on peer effects on student outcomes. Targets should be set to achieve a mix of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and the funding model should support schools to enroll local students from these different backgrounds. These should be system-level rather than school-level targets. Reducing segregation is not a responsibility that can be devolved to schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students.

Jurisdiction level targets should also be set for systems and schools to develop and implement plans that increase social diversity and measure progress towards developing more socially mixed schools. This could include reporting on (1) the proportion of students attending schools with socially balanced student populations versus the proportion of students attending schools with socially segregated student populations; and (2) the proportion of students attending schools where social composition is reflective of neighbourhood socioeconomic background. These targets would help to disincentivise ‘cherry-picking’ of advantaged and high achieving students from beyond school catchment zones.

Incentives for segregation include the differential resourcing of private and public schools and the selection practices of Universities via ENTER scores. State and Federal arrangements with higher education institutions need to prioritise enrolments from non-selective public schools in order to reverse the top-down pressure towards segregated schooling. This pressure is felt most strongly from the older universities, and in courses that have a majority intake from highly segregated private and public schools.

A target of at least fifty percent enrolments from non-selective public school students in all higher education courses would send a strong message and broaden the base of higher education.

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

Schools that carry the greatest burden of addressing social inequalities must be recognised as engines of innovation for the wider system (Teese 2006). These schools need to be resourced appropriately. Present funding models are based on financial support per individual student. This incorrectly assumes that funding is linear and individualized. Accountability for equity is hampered by the uneven playing field generated by the ability of some schools to enroll students in an exclusive fashion. A relatively small contribution is made by private schooling to the provision of socially inclusive learning environments, to the education of Indigenous students, and to the education of students with disabilities. Further, rights-based advances are hampered exemptions from anti-discrimination legislation that allow unequal treatment of students and staff on the basis of gender and sexuality.

All students should have guaranteed access to a local public school receiving at least 100% of its School Resource Standard (SRS) funding. State and Territory funding for public schools must genuinely meet the 75% target, excluding depreciation and other charges.

More broadly, a common framework for all Australian schools would help to address the critical problem of social segregation (Greenwell & Bonnor 2023). This framework could include policy levers such as all publicly funded schools being (1) free and prohibited from charging fees and (2) required to enrol students on a common, inclusive basis. In addition, it could incorporate an explicit statement of rights capable of guaranteeing fair education for all students and of guiding future policy changes.

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