1 August 2023

Dear Expert Panel,

RE. Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Thank you for considering our submission in response to the Consultation Paper for the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

We are writing as Chief Investigators and Research Assistants on the Australian Research Council Linkage funded study entitled 'How schools foster refugee student resilience' (Refugee Student Resilience Study – RSRS). This study is co-funded by the Department for Education (South Australia), Department of Education (Queensland), Catholic Education South Australia, Brisbane Catholic Education and Australian Refugee Association. In this submission, we specifically focus on how the Review may respond to the schooling needs of students from refugee backgrounds. Young people from refugee backgrounds generally arrive in Australia through the Humanitarian Programme, either via the off-shore (meaning application is made from a country outside of Australia) or on-shore (meaning application is made by applicant from within Australia) component (Department of Home Affairs, 2018). However, refugee background young people do not always enter Australia with a refugee-related visa (MYAN (Australia), 2016). Young people who enter through other migration streams, such as the family stream migration program, may still share refugee-like experiences. Coventry, Guerra, Mackenzie, and Pinkney (2002, p. 15) define the *refugee experience* as 'exposure to political, religious or inter-cultural violence persecution or oppression, armed conflict or civil discord that incorporates the following basic elements:
•   a state of fearfulness for self and family members,
•   leaving the country at short notice,
•   inability to return to the country of origin, and
•   uncertainty about the possibility of maintaining links with family and home.'
We draw on this understanding of *refugee experience* and the definition of 'a refugee young person' developed in 'The Good Practice Principles Guide for Working with Refugee Young People' (Victorian Settlement Planning Committee, 2005). The Refugee Student Resilience Study defines a refugee background young person as any young person who has come to Australia with refugee-like experience, regardless of their visa category. We suggest that funding for students from refugee backgrounds should similarly be allocated on the basis of refugee-like experience rather than visa category.

Below we respond to the key areas addressed in the Consultation Paper and Terms of Reference.

1.   **What targets and reforms should 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.**

- *Introduce a national schooling framework for students from refugee backgrounds (SfRB).* A national framework designed with specificity to address the needs of refugee background students would provide consistency in educational provision regardless of schooling sector or location.
- *Create a new distinct equity funding group relating to SfRB.* Within the current Schooling Resource Standard, SfRB primarily receive funding under the broader 'low-English proficiency loading'. Some SfRB may also be eligible for additional funding through the 'socio-educational disadvantage loading'. The subsuming of SfRB within the 'low-English proficiency' category tends to ignore the multiple and complex additional challenges faced by these students. These might include experiences of interrupted education, forced displacement-related trauma, ongoing settlement challenges, and caring responsibilities within families. Funding specific to language acquisition prevents these additional challenges from being adequately identified and addressed. In some states, the subsuming of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) within a broader 'Inclusion Policy' (as has occurred in QLD) has resulted in a loss of EALD expertise in educational departments and school middle management.
- *Fund schools based on SfRB enrolments*, in order for them to provide appropriate assistance that is distinct from EAL/D and low SES, and is tailored to the schools' socio-cultural context. Refugee-background students being conflated with other students of migrant backgrounds is highly problematic and a key constraint on refugee background students getting the extra support they require.
- *Increase the duration of student-specific loading to seven years*. Current equity funding arrangements for SfRB are limited to their early years of settlement in Australian schools. We submit that SfRB should be recognised as an equity group for seven years after arrival. A seven-year period would allow sufficient time to provide support for re-settlement, and language and literacy learning. This would enable schools to provide refugee students with the additional targeted academic and well-being related support necessary for equitable student outcomes.
- *Mandate the adoption of anti-racism policies by state education departments and all schools*. It is widely acknowledged that racism is pervasive in Australian schools (and society more broadly). Concerted efforts are required to reduce its prevalence and damaging effects on diverse racial and cultural groups. It is well documented that visibly different students (e.g. those from sub-Saharan African countries) face pervasive racial stigma and discrimination and student participants in our study reported facing inadequate school-based policies and practices when addressing racist abuse. Racial and cultural diversities are now features of Australian schools, and the absence of adequate antiracist policy is unacceptable. Meaningful antiracist policy development and implementation is an essential step in addressing refugee-background student needs, and requires individual schools and sectors to engage SfRB and their community members in local policy development processes.
- *Flexibly extend the time that EAL/D students can remain in initial intensive language programs*, based on need, rather than age or a set time.

2. **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.**

NB - to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students of refugee background in an empirically informed way, accurate data must be collected, which it currently is not. (See Q.4 below)

- *Mandate initial teacher education providers to include core training* (rather than as elective or specialised unit) *in trauma-informed and EAL/D pedagogies*.
- *Support schools to integrate trauma-responsive educational practices.* Trauma-responsive schools recognise that many SfRB faced adverse events. In creating safe learning environments for all students, trauma-informed schools bring an empathetic understanding of how trauma affects learning, behaviour, and relationships.

- *Provide resources to train and appoint wellbeing support liaison staff* to work with students, staff and refugee-background families to develop and implement strategies that bring culturally diverse families together.
- *Fund schools to become community-hubs* (good examples include: Milpera school in Brisbane as an intensive English Learning school; Community Hubs Australia). This place-based approach to schools as community hubs will increase their role as holistic learning places for all. In terms of families of refugee-background and other culturally diverse students, the community hub model increases educational engagement, family/school relationships, language acquisition and intercultural connectedness across the community.

3. **How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers**
   - *Address the limited numbers of qualified prospective teachers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds* to the profession. This might include having equity targets for the employment of teachers from CALD backgrounds to specific schools or regions.
   - *Create recruitment and accreditation programs for teachers with refugee backgrounds*, and mandate that universities adopt flexible and supported admissions processes. Appoint an expert group that includes at least 50% refugee-background educators to develop, implement and monitor these processes across universities.

4. **How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes**
   - *Distinguish between students from refugee backgrounds* (first and second generation and those with refugee experience rather than defined by visa category) *and students from the broader category of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) or EALD in all data collected.*
     - LBOTE and/or EALD as a category conflates two very diverse groups: (1) those whose families may have extensive cultural capital such as migrants who've arrived on professional class visas, and (2) students with refugee backgrounds who may have had severe interrupted schooling or none at all.
     - Across all systems there is a need to identify EAL/D and SfRB as separate categories, although students could belong to both groups.
     - LBOTE has been used in NAPLAN and drives a literacy rather than language response that undermines EAL/D.
   - *Appoint high level EALD and SfRB specialists and advocates within all state education departments*. These experts are needed to understand the contexts within which data has been collected, and thereby correctly interpret data, better coordinate and contribute shared knowledge and understanding of wellbeing, language, settlement data, and guide systemic decision making.

5. **How to ensure public funding is delivering on national agreements and that all school authorities are transparent and accountable to the community for how funding is invested and measuring the impacts of this investment.**
   - *Address inequities in funding between government and non-government schools.*
   - *Require that all equity funding delivered to schools be clearly accounted for in terms of how it is spent*.
   - *Hold all schools accountable for their EALD student initial assessment and enrolment procedures and systems including collecting specific information on refugee background students.*
   - *Resource schools with EALD experts* in order to utilise nuanced diagnostic tools and to effectively target learning support. These tools (such as EALD Bandscales) are available but are chronically under-used.
   - *Foreground qualitative, relational measures of transparency and accountability*, rather than (or in addition to) quantitative, impersonal measures. This could be achieved by mandating

community-based and public activities as qualitative forms of community answerability. For example, annual inter-school events for sharing and celebrating school-based policy enactments, training and community activities in each Local Government Area.
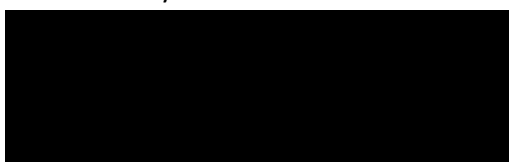
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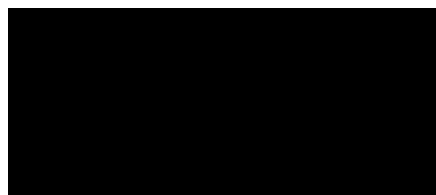
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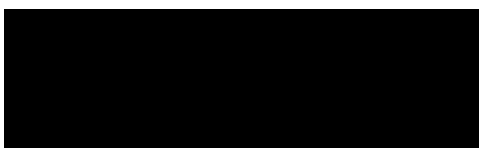
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