



Submission to NSRA Expert Panel

Review to inform a better and fairer education system

Introduction and context

Thank you for giving schools the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper for the review to inform a better and fairer education system. If time permitted, we would like to invite one or more members of the panel to visit the school and see the response to the NSRA review in action.

Rooty Hill High School is located in western Sydney in the Blacktown municipality. The school is located on Darug lands and 5% of its students identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Of the remaining students 56% are from language backgrounds other than English and the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school is a key feature. Just over 125 students have individualised learning and education plans, just over 80 have health plans and all students in the school have a personalised learning plan focused on their strengths, their capabilities, improving their progress in each subject, and recognizing their developing employability and citizenship skills.

In terms of the review, Rooty Hill HS is described as a comprehensive, high equity school, combining quality with equity. On ICSEA measures, 49% of student families are in the lowest quartile and 53% in the second lowest quartile. On FOEI (the family occupation and education index), a measure used in NSW that is a strong predictor of educational advantage, 75% of the students are in the lowest 2 quartiles. In the last 5 years, the data shows that our families have become poorer and less well educated compared to other schools.

On educational measures 60-80% of the Year 7 enrolments start below grade level and by the HSC have reduced the gap from 1.5 standard deviations below the mean to an average of 0.5 based on z-scores for each course. The school's results in NAPLAN, the NSW VALID Science tests and NSW minimum standards tests show that the students can demonstrate strong growth and progress from a low base.

The school has award-winning initiatives in student agency, entrepreneurial learning and wellbeing in recognition of its commitment to helping students access a broad range of outcomes and opportunities. Transition from school data indicates that, in 2022 53% of students were accepted to university on early entry or main round offers. Transitions to apprenticeships, traineeships and employment are the preferred choice of around 40% of families, many of whom are debt averse and think university costs too much.

The school does not receive 100% of the School Resource Standard (SRS) and was one of the schools most negatively impacted when the "Gonski" funding in Years 5 and 6 did not proceed. Many of the challenges we face today would have been avoided with "needs based funding" that would have supported additional teachers, specialist staff and access to resources, especially digital resources, for our students.

Term 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 - for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English.

As a large, secondary, comprehensive 7-12 school we would like to see the following:

- A much greater focus on secondary education, its subject-based structure and its complexity.
- A focus on ensuring that governments, systems and schools understand that they need to use differentiated policy and practice to meet the needs of 8,12 and 18 year olds learners. We always remember that 18 years olds in secondary schools vote and their experiences of education matter.

- Recognition that the complexity of language, skills, knowledge, curriculum and assessment increases in the level of difficulty rapidly after Year 7.
- Recognition, assessment and credentialling of the multiple pathways that students can access at school and beyond, especially in senior secondary schooling.
- We would like to see the recommendations to focus on “Year 12 completion” be changed to “**completion of Year 12 or the equivalent**” with active government measures to create other pathways for students and promote these nationally.
- Removal of the definition of equity used by the Productivity Commission as “equity in minimum or basic skills” to be replaced with a definition that encompasses the subject complexity, challenge and capabilities that secondary education must achieve for its students if they are to be considered “educated” when they leave school. We would like to see the panel define what an “educated 18-year-old” should be able to know, do and practice at the end of 13 years of schooling. It is much more than the “basics”.
- Deeper conversation about the student experience of disadvantage beyond the identified equity cohorts. In addition to the identified groups, we would also like to focus on students who live in poverty, students who are carers, students in out of home care, students whose families are highly mobile, students who have chronic health conditions, and students who have to “be old enough” (at ages 12-17) to have their own “agency” because nobody else in their family can complete forms, make decisions for them, or go out to work part-time to support the family.
- A commitment to students in secondary schools like ours, with a higher than average representation of students from “equity groups” having access to a broad range of opportunities and academic outcomes that go beyond “basic” literacy and numeracy. We would like to see attention to subject outcomes for secondary students as well as outcomes and competency benchmarks related to the ACARA capabilities (learning areas) and the Learning Progressions including critical and creative thinking, research skills, problem solving and applied learning.
- A recognition of the increasing importance of digital and device-based learning in secondary education, including the ability to work with “artificial intelligence”.
- In addition to academic and vocational outcomes, this review presents an opportunity do more in the other ACARA learning areas. The opportunity for all students to have learner passports and learner profiles that they develop throughout their schooling is one we think can be taken, especially if it includes micro-credentialling from TAFE, traineeships and short courses and is based on every student having a USI.

Term of Reference 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.

As a large, comprehensive secondary 7-12 school that does have an “MH1” class and program for students with severe anxiety, depression and suicide ideation, we would support the thesis of this section of the consultation paper about the importance of schools using strong wellbeing practices to build protective factors for students and strong wellbeing cultures that support the community of the school. Our students and families have faced significant social challenges and risk factors in recent years including being in a “hard lockdown” LGA during COVID, increased violence (including youth gang violence), managing social media and cyber bullying, increased problematic and harmful sexualised behaviour, increased numbers of students and parents with chronic health conditions, and increased child protection reports.

Our evidence indicates that when students feel safe, feel they belong, actively engage and take responsibility for their own learning they are more likely to complete school and make progress.

The school has recently been recognised as “excelling” in wellbeing in the NSW Department of Education external validation and has evolved its wellbeing practice to ensure that there are universal, targeted and intensive strategies in place. The strategies used are based in evidence and expert practice. Staff receive ongoing professional learning to build their capacity. The school has created programs that address respect and responsibility, restorative practice and resilience. The school’s equity strategies are aligned to the school’s values and are supported by providing additional learning support in class and through the school’s Learning Centre (Years 7-9) and Senior Study (Years 10-12). The school ensures that wellbeing and learning are complementary and there is a strong, positive student culture.

Despite this we have never worked harder and more of our students are needing intensive support to be able to “do school”. One of the major challenges is the lack of support outside the school from the Department of Education and other agencies. Our senior staff spend hours documenting and reporting concerns, often to be told that the school will need to find a way to provide additional support because the “system” cannot. The agencies and corporate staff seem to want to do their best but there is not enough support for adolescents in western Sydney and the services are fragmented and often ineffective. The school does not need “expert panels” or more “consultants”.

What we would like to see:

- Recognition of the work of secondary schools and their staff as leaders in providing wellbeing support to adolescents in recent years.
- Additional health and psychological services based in secondary schools, including school nurses. For example, some of the most highly funded mental health services are not allowed to work in schools.
- Additional mental health services, including adolescent mental health services in western Sydney – the current level of hospital beds for adolescent mental health is simply inadequate.
- Charity, not-for-profit, university and business partners who can work **with** schools, recognising the capacity and expertise of schools, teachers and staff.
- A coherent community and policing strategy to deal with the youth violence in our community perpetrated by a small, but very disengaged group of young people, that is affecting schools and student safety in our part of Sydney.
- A recognition that more parents are struggling with “parenting” and are relying more on schools for help financially, socially and emotionally. We currently work with charities and our local partner primary school in a project called ‘Project Kindness’ where we are preparing meals for families who cannot afford to eat. This is not our core work. As a local government secondary school and school-community we would like the government to support us with external strategies and practices that build the community support and enable all our families to be able to feed themselves.

Term of Reference 3: How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers.

In the next agreement, it is not only schools that need support. The crisis in getting secondary teachers into every secondary school, class and subject has been more than a decade in the making, reflecting poor planning by governments, systems, and universities. It also reflects the way the teaching profession has been negatively positioned by some governments, Australian media, and many “think tanks”.

The consultation speaks about “effective teachers”. At this school we would argue that there are strong patterns of “effective teaching” and that both the teacher and the team with whom they work are critical in discussing teaching in secondary education settings.

There is no “quick fix” for the teacher shortage and our secondary schools are at risk of not being able to help students achieve their potential. Any response will require significant additional funding, clear and measurable policy and a commitment to supporting the profession in schools, especially in government secondary schools where the shortage is having the most impact.

The 2003 proposition (Hattie) cited in the consultation paper that the teacher is the most significant in-school factor should be contested for secondary schools given the increased stratification and segregation between secondary schools, increased student complexity and the changing demands of the secondary curriculum and assessment that have taken place since 2003. In secondary schools, student factors are critical and require different expectations of how staff work with adolescent learners – who are not children. Being able to respond to the needs of students from a range of “identified equity groups” requires considerable professional skill and expertise which many teachers have.

As a school where professional practice has been rated as “excelling” at External Validation we have limited confidence in the recommendations and suggestions made in Chapter 4. Instead, we would like to recommend:

- Continuing to base accreditation on the descriptors in the AITSL Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. They may need some updating but are a strong baseline for identifying effective teaching practice.
- That the panel ensures there is a much deeper understanding of the observable and measurable difference between the practice of teachers and the way that practice has been documented in different states and territories. At this school, which has had significantly more early career teachers in the last decade than many other schools, APST Proficient is considered the minimum required for registration. It is like a driver's licence, it is a starting qualification. The majority of the teaching staff at this school set their professional goals at APST Highly Accomplished and Lead. While they do not have a "document", their practice continues to be highly effective, collaborative and makes an impact. It is bureaucracies that have regulated and limited the number of teachers who can be HALTs. This needs to change.
- That the profession does not need another career progression model. For the last decade there have been so many reports and recommendations from outside schools. In our opinion, those reports lack rigour and provide no evidence of the need for change.
- That governments take a "close look" at why teachers have lost trust and confidence in their employers. It is not enough to say, "we will reduce workloads" or "we will provide additional resources". Our teachers want to do professional work in designing learning and lessons. They want to contextualise their programs to the needs of all our students, especially those from "equity groups". They want time to work with colleagues. And they want to be respected for the high-quality professional work they do each day in each subject. There is evidence and research to inform how this Review can use the new agreement to redefine the relationship with teachers, value the profession and recognise the broad impact teachers are having with students every day in schools like ours.

Based on the school's history, students in Year 12 would have previously considered a career in secondary teaching. The panel can provide advice to governments on the following barriers experienced by students from "equity groups" and students enrolled at our school:

- The "doubling" of HECs and university costs for humanities degrees which includes almost all teaching degrees. Given the cost of living in western Sydney and the relatively low salaries for teaching compared to other professions, this is a significant barrier for our students whose families are often debt-averse.
- The lack of secondary degrees in secondary teaching subjects. We do not understand why the federal government and employers cannot insist that universities, including our local university, WSU, offer secondary teaching degrees in all subjects. The federal and state governments could even fund some priority degree courses with guaranteed employment, especially for students from "identified equity groups". In 2023 we had students who graduated in 2022 who could not access a teaching degree in their subject of choice.
- The structure of ITE. The practicum students who have been placed at this school are generally of very high quality, but many find the financial cost of unpaid practicum considerable, especially if they need to stop working to complete requirements. Locally, some non-government schools have offered paid cadetships to students for their final year of study at university, with a guaranteed employment offer. We think government secondary schools should have funding to be able to do the same.
- Although there are some highly effective teachers who are "career changers", we hope the panel will make sure governments recognise that, for most teachers, teaching is a career in its own right and the capacity to teach a secondary subject through to Year 12 requires deep knowledge of the subject, discipline based pedagogy, the capacity to translate curriculum into challenging, interesting and effective learning tasks, and a capacity to work with learners to help them achieve their best.
- The general cost to students of undertaking a 5-year university credential. Unlike professions that offer cadetships funded by large corporations, students who enter university to gain a teaching qualification are forced to work long hours in fields unrelated to teaching to pay for basic necessities. The introduction of a well-paid "commonwealth scholarship" for students enrolled in a secondary teaching degree would be an attraction for the best and brightest students to move into teaching and to remain in the profession for a minimum of five years. This approach worked in previous periods of high teacher shortage and can work now.

Term of Reference 4: How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes.

As a school, we have a long record of identifying, collecting, analysing and making meaning of data from a range of sources to “tell the story of the school”. We have designed and delivered high quality professional learning for staff to enable them to understand and use internal and external data ethically and to measure the effectiveness and impact of their work.

What we would like to see:

- A much greater focus in the new agreement placed on the “progress” of individual students and targeted cohorts across a range of outcomes and the recognition of their “journeys” using longitudinal data.
- Data sets that enable schools, systems, and government to tell the “longitudinal story”, rather than annual snapshots based on limited data sets. It is the pattern of data sets that best explains the impact of the work of schools and the journey of students.
- Technical guides and much better explanations of how school measures are calculated and how and why school targets are set by systems.
- A greater valuing of school based and subject based academic data in secondary schools including grades and performance against outcomes. The HSC in NSW includes both school-based assessment and examinations – it is expensive. It is also rigorous, reflecting student performance across a range of courses and subjects.
- A more systematic, accurate and authentic set of evidence of learning and wellbeing for students in Year 6 to assist their transition to high school and enable the secondary school to better target learning. In a school where 60-80% of students start below grade average, baseline the data about progress on the literacy and numeracy learning progressions, school “grades” and wellbeing data provided by our partner schools and supplemented by parent and student is critical to our work. Systems should be able to develop much better ways of collecting, reporting and communicating.
- Learner portfolios and passports for (and “owned by”) all secondary students encompassing a wide range of outcomes and including micro credentialling, evidence of capabilities, records from the student’s “life” such as part-time work, and contributions to the school-community.
- A more widespread use of “Outcomes Based Accountability” with thoughtful definitions of how the effort made is reflected in the impact of policy, strategies and practice. It is our experience that governments have often focused on input measures such as how funds are allocated to specific programs, rather than focusing on how well those programs were delivered and what impact they made. Without that information, schools and systems often persist with interventions that do not work. In our view this has been a critical limitation with a negative impact on “equity groups” and we would like the panel to recommend ways this can be addressed in the new agreement.
- Finally, we recommend a move away from the use of the word ‘targets’ and away from the use of NAPLAN as the only way of establishing national reading and numeracy goals and outcomes. When introduced in NSW the equivalent test was used by teachers to diagnose student strengths and weaknesses and to plan for improvements in student learning. Now it is used as a national, state, region and school educational barometer it creates an environment of over testing; students (especially by Year 9) see little value in yet another online test and can become quite disengaged. If national data is the point of the exercise a different model should be explored. The PISA process of random selection of schools and random selection of students from a particular cohort would provide statistically acceptable data with no loss of learning time for most students, in most schools. It is also important to make writing more visible in the literacy outcomes as it is a critical key to students accessing learning in the secondary years, especially the senior secondary years.

Term of Reference 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.

It has been our experience that governments have rarely been transparent in sharing data and information with schools. It has also been our experience that systems only use the aggregated data sets they have and then manipulate them to report on schools, even when the validity can be questioned.

We would like to see:

- Schools, teachers, school staff, principals and community given clear, ethically identified and accurate information in the new agreement on school funding, how data will be collected and used ethically, how decisions will be made to ensure “equity”, how the government will reverse the teacher shortage crisis and what expectations will be held of the school given its funding and enrolment profile.
- Governments provide a clear line of sight between SRS allocations to ensure that government secondary schools are receiving 100% of the SRS.
- The panel make a stronger recommendation on requiring approving authorities to report on the allocation of base and equity loadings to schools. Schools like ours were able to provide better transparency to our community and were better able to plan equity strategies when the “federal funds” were allocated into a “6200” account (6100 being the annual state government funding). We would also like to see a 3-year funding cycle to enable targeted equity policies and practices to be better planned, implemented and evaluated for impact.
- A way of being able to report to our school community on how the funding we received, including for “equity cohorts” is allocated, distributed and spent by the government, the Department of Education and the school.
- A system where there is a reversal of the ‘blame the school’, “blame the teachers” strategy to one in which accountability starts with government decisions on how funds are allocated and distributed. At present many parents in our community know that the local non-government schools received more government funding per student than the local government school (though they may not know why or where the funding comes from) and they assume this means those schools are “better schools”. As this school has a much greater proportion of students from the lowest quartiles, far more students from targeted equity cohorts and more students needing targeted and intensive interventions, this appears and is unfair.

Submitted on behalf of the staff, students and community of Rooty Hill High School by:

Christine Cawsey AM

Principal Rooty Hill High School

Badanami, Merana, Ngioba – on Darug lands

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