



Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Submission to Expert Panel

2 August 2023

This submission is made by Save the Children and 54 reasons.

Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights which has been active in Australia for over 100 years. 54 reasons is our Australian service delivery arm, working alongside children and their families and communities in accordance with the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). We support and advocate for children aged up to 18, from their early years to across the school years.

Our submission reflects our perspective as Australia's leading child rights organisation and our experience in giving children's rights – including the right to education – practical expression through policy design and service delivery. Our views are based on a child rights approach and informed by insights and evidence from our work with children, families and communities across Australia, particularly our evidence-based programs that operate in schools as part of integrated responses to meet students' needs (see Attachment).

Our submission draws from, and builds on, our two submissions to the Productivity Commission's recent review of the national school reform agreement (NSRA).¹ We refer the Expert Panel to those submissions for additional detail and references.

Our overall comments are:

- The next NSRA should have a much stronger focus on student wellbeing, student engagement and student voice. This would improve student outcomes across the education system.
- Children, as students, have a fundamental right to access high quality education, on an equitable basis, through settings and delivery modes that suit and include them.² The best way to improve and maximise student outcomes is by establishing school systems and associated policy arrangements that truly enable all children to enjoy this right.
- Wellbeing, engagement and learning are the three pillars of a quality education,³ for individual students and across school systems as a whole. Wellbeing, engagement and learning are inseparably interrelated. Each is a crucial outcome of schooling in its own right, and a necessary enabler for the others. For example, positive wellbeing and engagement with learning are

¹ Available at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/submissions> – submissions 23 (initial submission) and 64 (final submission). Direct links to submissions:

<https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/fb3f9421-c39e-4dc9-9ffe-4606b44e0042/2022-06-17-save-the-children-submission-review-of-national-school-reform-agreement-letter-from-matt-gardiner.pdf.aspx> (initial submission) and <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/e874c218-ad06-4b24-a764-6880a82ca0a3/2022-10-14-save-the-children-and-54-reasons-submission-review-of-national-school-reform-agreement-interim-report.pdf.aspx> (final submission).

² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28.

³ Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018, *Student wellbeing, engagement and learning across the middle years*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, p 14.



important ends in themselves, as well as being essential preconditions for successful academic learning.

- Student voice, agency and participation drives improved wellbeing, engagement and learning.⁴ When students have a meaningful, embedded voice about their education, individually and system-wide, there are significant compounding benefits for the students' own outcomes and for overall school system performance. This also reflects the right of children, as students, to be heard, taken seriously and participate in all decisions affecting them – a right that is of particular importance to children and young people in developing, learning and thriving.⁵

The rest of our submission responds directly to relevant questions in the Consultation Paper.

Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

Consultation 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)?

It is critical that the next NSRA measure student outcomes going beyond academic performance and extending beyond the outcomes (academic and otherwise) measured under the existing NSRA.

The next NSRA should measure student outcomes relating to each of student wellbeing, student engagement, and student voice, agency and participation.

Consultation question 3: How can all students at risk of falling behind be identified early on to enable swift learning interventions?

Consistent measurement of wellbeing and engagement would assist with early identification of students at risk of falling behind.

Consultation question 4: Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?

Yes. Children who are living in out-of-home care should be a priority equity cohort in the next agreement. This should extend, with appropriate calibration, to children who are not currently living in out-of-home care but have experience of out-of-home care. In our experience, children living in out-of-home care face significant, systemic barriers to accessing and remaining engaged in education and achieving good educational outcomes. As a group, they are educationally vulnerable due to their multiple experiences of adversity and the ongoing effects of trauma. Services and systems – including schools – have consistently not met their needs, primarily due to services being inadequately integrated, organised around children and their best interests, culturally responsive and trauma responsive.

⁴ D Gonski et al, 2018, *Through growth to achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, pp 25-6; Department of Education and Training, Victorian Government, 2019, *Amplify: Empowering students through voice, agency and leadership*, pp 8-9 and elsewhere; Department of Education, NSW Government, 2022, *Why student voice matters*, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/student-voices/student-voice-and-leadership/why-student-voice-matters#Research0>.

⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.



Consultation question 5: What should the specific targets in the next NSRA be? Should the targets be different for primary and secondary schools? If so, how? What changes are required to current measurement frameworks, and what new measures might be required?

The next NSRA should include specific targets relating to student wellbeing, student engagement, and student voice, agency and participation.

Consultation question 6: 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?

New targets relating to student wellbeing, student engagement and student voice, agency and participation (as recommended) could be accompanied by the development of a national initiative that provides funding for schools to access specialist school-based support and programs that support student wellbeing, engagement and voice. This would enable jurisdictions and schools to access evidence-based approaches that respond to individual student circumstances and needs, within the context of a national coherent reform agenda and targets.

The initiative could include parameters for what support and programs could be accessed, which could include evidence-based programs with demonstrated impact as well as promising practices. It could take the form of a fund that could be accessed by schools as needed, or a direct allocation to school budgets with a requirement that the allocation be used for eligible specialist school-based supports and programs supporting wellbeing, engagement and voice.

This initiative would complement existing efforts to build the mental health and wellbeing capacity of school workforces.

Improving student mental health and wellbeing

Consultation question 9: What evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools and communities should be considered as part of a national reform agenda?

There are many evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools and communities that should be considered as part of a national reform agenda. One starting point for identifying these would be relevant collations that have been developed by state governments based on assessment of existing school-based wellbeing programs' effectiveness and other criteria, such as the Victorian Schools Mental Health Menu and the NSW Student Wellbeing external programs catalogue.

We note that existing collations of that type do not comprehensively capture all relevant programs and approaches due to their respective scopes. For example, the definitions that they adopt do not necessarily include programs that target student engagement or student voice, agency and participation, despite the close relationship between those outcomes and improved student wellbeing.

We also draw the Expert Panel's attention to two school-based wellbeing programs delivered by 54 reasons:

- Hands on Learning, which builds at-risk students' connection to school by engaging them in practical, hands-on activities that are meaningful to them and their schools, increasing their sense of belonging
- Journey of Hope, which is a school-based group-work intervention for children who have experienced a collective trauma, supporting emotional processing and coping strategies.



Both programs are evidence-based and have a demonstrated track record of impact in Australian schools and communities. The Attachment to this submission provides more detail and we would be happy to provide additional information and external research relating to both programs.

Consultation question 10: Should a wellbeing target be included in the next NSRA? Could this use existing data collections, or is additional data required?

Yes. A wellbeing target should be included in the next NSRA. It is likely that a wellbeing target could draw on existing data collections but would also require additional data.

Wellbeing is a complex and multi-faceted concept. A meaningful measure of student wellbeing should:

- Take into account that wellbeing is influenced by both personal characteristics and the wider social environment in which a student lives
- Include school-based factors affecting wellbeing, such as sense of belonging at school, while recognising that wellbeing is influenced by both school and family factors
- Include consideration of strengths as well as challenges – that is, not be focused only on deficiencies and difficulties
- Include student self-assessment of wellbeing
- Recognise the inter-relationship between positive wellbeing and engagement with learning, while specifically measuring both wellbeing and engagement through separate targets.

A separate student engagement target should:

- Include each of the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement
- Recognise that disengagement manifests on a spectrum from being passively ‘checked out’ through to being more actively disruptive and ultimately not attending school at all and measure and report on these differing manifestations
- Expand significantly on existing measurement and reporting on attendance and retention data (noting those are only one end of the spectrum of disengagement). The existing NSRA includes performance measures relating to retention, completion and attainment. This reflects a very limited perspective on what ‘engagement’ means, and excludes any measurement of students’ sense of belonging or inclusion in their schools or broader dimensions of engagement. Broader and more meaningful measures should be included in the next NSRA.

Consultation question 11: Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?

Yes. There would be benefit in surveying students to help understand these and other matters relating to student wellbeing and engagement. Students’ own perspectives should be centred when defining, measuring and seeking to promote student wellbeing.

Such surveys and any other measures adopted to measure and monitor wellbeing and engagement would be different in nature from the existing NAPLAN assessments. Their primary purpose would be to enable support to be directed to students and schools where data shows it is required.

However, there would be value in student wellbeing and engagement being regularly reported in a form that can be disaggregated to school level and analysed against student learning and attendance data, integrated with the My School website. This could be described as a ‘NAPLAN for wellbeing’. This data



should be carefully and meaningfully contextualised – for example, with information about the backgrounds of students attending a school, progress over time, and other relevant information.

Consultation question 12: To what extent do school leaders and teachers have the skills and training to support students struggling with mental health?

School leaders and teachers have variable levels of skills and training to support students struggling with mental health. Just as relevantly, school leaders and teachers have very limited time – or ‘bandwidth’ – to acquire, maintain and practice such skills, given the many other calls upon their time.

Several states and territories have invested significantly in recent years to enhance the capacity of school workforces to support mental health, including accelerating these efforts in response to COVID-19. This includes initiatives to increase the numbers of mental health practitioners in schools, as well as upskilling and training existing workforces. These initiatives are very welcome.

However, in our experience, the demands on schools are so great that initiatives of this type will not be sufficient – or timely – to meet the significant need that exists, and is growing, in relation to what has aptly been called a student mental health crisis. This has led us to recognise the important role played by reputable externally provided, evidence-based programs – such as those that we ourselves offer (see Attachment) – that can be delivered in schools to support student wellbeing and engagement in ways that integrate with in-school efforts and capabilities and meet individual schools’ circumstances and needs.

There are opportunities for governments, including both State and Territory governments and the Federal government, to increase system capacity and support for schools and students by working more collaboratively and flexibly with non-government organisations and community services providers of in-school services and programs that promote mental health and wellbeing. At times, State government departments and agencies are reluctant to work in partnership with non-government providers, likely for a range of reasons. The Federal government in particular could play a valuable role by encouraging greater collaboration and partnering (including through appropriate incentives for State governments to do so), and supporting the national scaling and availability of programs that have proven effective in a state but require appropriate supporting conditions to be made accessible at a national level.

Matt Gardiner
CEO, 54 reasons



ATTACHMENT – 54 REASONS’ SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

54 reasons (a part of the Save the Children Australia Group) supports and delivers programs directly in schools to support students’ wellbeing, engagement, learning and development across Australia. Insights and evidence from these programs and our involvement with the schools and communities where they operate informs our perspective. Two programs of particular relevance are described below.

Hands on Learning

Hands on Learning builds at-risk students’ connection to school by engaging them in practical, hands-on activities that are meaningful to them and their schools, increasing their sense of belonging with an explicit focus on teaching, building and measuring social and emotional skills development. The program is facilitated by trained artisan-teachers and strengthens students’ capacities, connection to their schools and learning, and sense of meaning and purpose. Participants are students who are at risk of disengagement.

Hands on Learning has operated for 24 years and is currently delivered in over 130 primary and secondary schools, mostly in Victoria. The program continued operating throughout the lockdowns and remote learning requirements of the pandemic, responding to the particular challenges that those requirements – and the broader wellbeing impacts of the pandemic – created for student engagement, particularly for students already at risk of disengagement.

A 2022 review by dandolo highlighted that 95% of participants finish school or get an apprenticeship or a job. The independent analysis found the program ‘meets a clear need’, ‘is grounded in evidence and demonstrates a commitment to measuring impact’ and has a ‘very low threshold for investment in the program to break even and to deliver a positive return on investment. If only 1.1% of their annual cohort finish school when they wouldn’t have otherwise, they break even.’⁶

Journey of Hope

Journey of Hope is a school-based group-work intervention for children who have experienced a collective trauma, supporting emotional processing and coping strategies. The program has operated in bushfire-affected communities since the immediate response to the Black Summer bushfires ended in 2020. It has also proved effective in supporting student wellbeing and resilience in response to the compounding and separate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 2020, Journey of Hope has reached over 5500 students in over 70 schools across NSW and Victoria. A number of Commonwealth Government departments and agencies – and other partners – have funded the program to support recovery from the Black Summer bushfires, the 2022 east coast floods, and COVID-19. The program is also highlighted in the Commonwealth Government’s National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2021).

The program’s impact has been widely recognised. A 2021 evaluation supported by the University of Melbourne found that ‘the program was serving critical needs’ and ‘Program participation was associated with statistically significant improvements in students’ report of difficulties in their daily lives, in their attitudes to and relationships with others, and in their use of positive coping strategies ... Based on wider evidence, these psychosocial improvements are also likely to support children’s capacity to learn.’⁷

⁶ dandolopartners, *An independent analysis of Hands on Learning – 2021*, available at <https://handsonlearning.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Hands-on-Learning-Independent-analysis.pdf>.

⁷ Alexander, L., Carpenter, L., Simpson, J., Gibbs, L. (2021). *Journey of Hope Evaluation*. Save the Children Australia and University of Melbourne, available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/7a14b618-c1a6-4290-93a1-d73656bd06fc/JoH-evaluation-report.pdf.aspx>.