

Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

August 2023

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Executive summary

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

Our input to this consultation process is informed by our experience working on multiple school education and early years programs and initiatives over our twenty-year history. To achieve effective and equitable educational outcomes, we believe that educators must be prepared with the knowledge, skills and tools they will need to respond to the needs of students and communities, operating within a high-performing system. The National School Reform Agreement is an important mechanism for governments to work together to pursue these outcomes.

Our submission comprises two parts:

1. The next generation of evidence mobilisation and collaborative networking

Improving student outcomes, especially for those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, requires everyone in the system to have a better understanding of what works to improve outcomes. To close equity gaps, we need to do a much better job of generating, sharing and using evidence in education. Only by doing more of 'what works' (and less of what doesn't) can we hope to improve the outcomes over time.

In recent years, Australia has made good progress. The establishment of AERO was a landmark recognition of the importance of evidence to drive better education outcomes. But we cannot stand still. The next NSRA must maintain this focus on evidence, and should do so by focusing on the next phase of work – evidence mobilisation.

The 300,000+ workforce in Australian schools are one of the greatest influences on children's learning – educators are the key to improving outcomes for children and young people, especially those experiencing disadvantage. Because educators are key, we have to work on behavioural incentives and capability building mechanisms so they are empowered to be and see themselves as experts, confidently using evidence to make good decisions, dozens of times a day.

We need to use multiple policy levers to steer all participants in the system towards high-quality evidence use. We recommend four initiatives for inclusion in the next NSRA give more ownership to educators on evidence generation and mobilisation:

- A school innovation fund (with supporting infrastructure) to support schools to engage with high quality evidence generation of promising programs and initiatives with potential to scale;
- Stronger collaborative networks to support educators to share evidence and build capability;
- Better stewardship of the evidence ecosystem by government;
- Creation of an 'evidence guardian' to improve the quality of investment by schools

2. Responses to questions from the Consultation Paper

In this section we share information and analysis that may be useful to the panel in considering some of the specific issues raised in the discussion paper. This includes our involvement in systematic reviews of student health and wellbeing, and of teacher recruitment and retention; our experience in collaborative networked approaches to supporting teachers in complex settings; our knowledge of how data can be used to improve outcomes, and of the importance of transparency in evaluation of school programs and initiatives.

Table of recommendations

1. The next generation of evidence mobilisation and collaborative networking

Recommendation 1.1: Governments should establish a national School Innovation Fund that supports educators and schools to generate high-quality evidence on initiatives with potential for scale, with a focus on issues and contexts relevant to improving equity in student outcomes

Recommendation 1.2: Governments should create and establish a series of focussed and active practitioner collaboration networks to both mobilise and amplify practice-based evidence

Recommendation 1.3: Governments should seek to steward quality evidence use by investing in capability building, and incentivising partnerships between government agencies and independent organisations that can help to build demand for better evidence from educators.

Recommendation 1.4: Governments should support independent 'evidence guardians' in key areas of school expenditure to improve investment decisions. In the first instance, governments should establish an 'evidence guardian' for educator professional learning

2. Responses to questions from the Consultation Paper

Recommendation 2.1: That the Panel consider the best available evidence on what works in formulating its approach to improving student mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 2.2: That the Panel consider the best available evidence on what works in formulating its approach to attracting and retaining teachers

Recommendation 2.3: That the Panel consider the opportunities offered by investment in networked collaboration peer support structures across school communities that are designed for school leaders and teachers to share professional support, expertise, knowledge and practice at point of need.

Recommendation 2.4: That the Panel consider the best available evidence on what works in formulating its approach to using digital technology to improve learning

Recommendation 2.5: That the Panel consider how changes to data collection and reporting under the new NSRA can be aligned with other efforts within and outside government to improve data availability and sharing

Recommendation 2.6: That the Panel consider how lead indicators can be incorporated into the measurement framework in the new NSRA

Recommendation 2.7: That the Panel consider what can be learnt from and aligned with analyses of data limitations and opportunities in the early years sector regarding improving education data in Australia, with a focus on better systematic collection and linkage of data

Recommendation 2.8: That the Panel consider how the new NSRA can encourage and incentivise the use of rigorous evaluation approaches, and make evaluation findings public to make them useful to a wider range of people and organisations

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Introduction and context

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is a not-for-profit organisation with the mission to alleviate disadvantage, towards an Australia where all people and communities thrive. We influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives, advocating for change and influencing systems.

Improving educational outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage has been a major focus for SVA since our founding twenty years ago, in recognition of the importance of education in improving outcomes across the life course. Over the past ten years, SVA has incubated two ventures with the goal of supporting teachers and school leaders as professionals:

- [The Connection](#) is a collaborative network initiative for education systems that was created by SVA in 2013. The *Connection* networks are designed to assist school leaders in fast changing contexts to address common challenges together and then drive evidence-informed action in their schools collectively. It is designed to grow school site leadership capacity and accelerate impact across education systems. *The Connection* began in a codesign process combining insights from both education stakeholders and practicing professionals in schools. *The Connection* supports and builds the capacity of school leadership teams in schools located in challenged communities to improve the outcomes of their students. *The Connection* builds a culture of collaboration to share expertise and knowledge based on network theory. We currently work with 40 schools, have an active alumni group of 10 schools from previous cohorts, and are partnering with state governments and universities to expand the practice of the model within target groups including Early Years, First Nations education, digital literacies, and rural, remote and regional contexts focussing on education vulnerability and equity. Since 2013 *The Connection* has worked with 86 education sites across four Australian states, convened 37 national multi day gatherings, 56 codesigned hub days and conducted over 1000 school site engagement visits. *The Connection* uses a bespoke purpose designed online interactive collaboration platform.
- [Evidence for Learning](#) (E4L) is a non-profit education venture incubated by SVA. Established in 2015, E4L is committed to ensuring all children throughout Australia, regardless of background, make the best possible learning progress. E4L does this by improving the quality, availability and use of evidence in education and collaborating with education researchers, policy makers, systems leaders, educators, professional learning providers, philanthropists and the wider community. E4L holds the exclusive Australian licence to education research, assets and tools produced by the UK's Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and localises these for Australian educators. Over the last seven years, E4L has delivered over 500 professional learning events directly reaching over 13,000 early years and school educators and works in partnership with more than 20 professional learning providers, education authorities and education organisations across Australia. E4L has over 23,000 users, most of whom are educators, frequently accessing materials via the E4L website. E4L is a founding member of the Evidence for Education Network, which consists of a growing number of global partners of the Education Endowment Foundation who are dedicated to improving education equity through the better use of evidence across the world. Each member of the network works nationally on evidence generation, translation and mobilisation, and convenes as a network regularly to collaborate on shared evidence bases and research trial processes, and lessons on embedding evidence into practice and policy.

In recent years, SVA has had an increasing focus on the early years, as a foundation for better future outcomes. In this domain, the [Restacking the Odds](#) initiative is particularly relevant to this consultation process. *Restacking the Odds* aims to drive equitable outcomes by ensuring that children and families can access a combination of high-quality, evidence-informed, community-based services.¹ The initiative's unique approach uses data and evidence-based indicators to focus on *how* to work

¹ The initiative is a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health (Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI)), Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Bain & Company. The *Restacking the Odds* collaboration has provided its own submission to the Panel,

differently to improve outcomes for children, families and communities. The early years of school (defined as Reception through to Year 3) is one of the five platforms it investigates.

Our input to this consultation process is informed by our experience working on these and related initiatives. In summary, to achieve effective and equitable educational outcomes, we believe that educators must be prepared with the knowledge, skills and tools they will need to respond to the needs of students and communities, operating within a high-performing system. The National School Reform Agreement is an important mechanism for governments to work together to pursue these outcomes.

Recognising the wide range of issues raised in the Consultation Paper, our submission focusses on those areas where our past work has given us insight into one or more relevant issues. We have divided this submission into two parts:

1. The next generation of evidence mobilisation and collaborative networking

This part draws on our experience and expertise in developing and running Evidence for Learning and The Connection and provides recommendations for using these approaches to lift student outcomes. It is also informed by the discussion between our staff and the Panel at a consultation session in June 2023. This material cuts across all five themes included in the Consultation Paper, but is particularly relevant to Improving Student Outcomes, and Attracting and Retaining Teachers.

2. Other issues

This part of the submission seeks to answer specific questions asked by the Panel in the Consultation Paper on topics in which SVA has unique experience and expertise to share. We have not sought to address every question in the Consultation Paper.

1. The next generation of evidence mobilisation and collaborative networking

1.1. Why a focus on evidence mobilisation?

Governments across Australia have identified that both excellence and equity are key goals for Australia's education system. Despite this aspiration, there are still too many students who are being left behind in their learning. Improving educational outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage has been a major focus for SVA since our founding twenty years ago, in recognition of its importance in improving outcomes across the life course.

The Consultation Paper notes that

“The delivery of an excellent education needs to be attuned to the needs of students from all backgrounds, including First Nations students, students with disability, students in regional, rural and remote areas, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from a non-English speaking background. To do this means supporting education systems and schools to implement evidence-based practice consistently and to learn from one another.”

SVA agrees that improving student outcomes, especially for those experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, requires everyone in the system – governments, school systems, school leaders, and teachers – to have a better understanding of what works to improve outcomes. To close equity gaps, we need to do a much better job of generating, sharing and using evidence in education. Only by doing more of 'what works' (and less of what doesn't) can we hope to improve the outcomes over time.

In recent years, Australia has made good progress on this. The establishment of the Australian Education Research Organisation, as an output of a workstream of the previous NSRA, was a landmark recognition of the importance of evidence to drive better education outcomes.

But we cannot stand still. The next NSRA must maintain this focus on evidence, and should do so by focusing on the next phase of work – evidence mobilisation. We need to strengthen the full evidence ecosystem to get evidence into the hands of those who can use it and help them to use it to its full potential.

If we use evidence in a better way throughout the Australian education system – if we mobilise the best available research evidence and engage with practitioner-generated data to create change -- we can help:

- Schools to make better decisions in their settings on where to focus, which teaching practices and programs to implement to support all students regardless of their background, and which practices and programs to avoid because they are unlikely to make a difference to learning and wellbeing outcomes.
- Schools, alongside education authorities, to increase the likelihood of success by implementing teaching practices and programs properly, so that they deliver the promised benefits to all students.
- Education authorities and funders to move their spending and support behind approaches with better likelihood of improving outcomes.
- Ensure society and the economy have more productive education systems.

We need to see improvement across three separate domains (which overlap and reinforce each other):

- Drive demand for research evidence
- Strengthen support for building capabilities related to evidence, including generating evidence at the school level
- Generate new evidence on topics important for educators

If we do these things, we support the profession to make wise choices that will improve learning and wellbeing outcomes.

In doing this work, we must maintain a focus on supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage, and ensure that the approaches being implemented will support them as much or more than their more advantaged peers. This may involve identifying and highlighting the different effects of researched approaches on students from disadvantaged backgrounds; ensuring that research is conducted in varied settings and with different cohorts of students; or prioritising support and resources for schools in complex circumstances and with high-needs cohorts to help them implement evidence in a contextually and/or culturally responsive way.

1.2. What do we mean by ‘evidence’?

‘Evidence’ is an often-used and sometimes contested term in education. For the purposes of this submission, we are primarily concerned with two categories of evidence: research evidence and practice evidence.

Informed by AERO’s definitions of evidence,² we define research evidence and practice evidence as follows:

- Research evidence – This is research which uses clearly defined and rigorous methodologies, methods and measures of impact, such as causal research or systematic synthesis research, to provide insights into educational practice.
- Practice evidence - This is evidence “generated through practitioners in their daily practice (for example, teacher observations, information gained from formative assessments or insights from student feedback on teacher practice)”³

Both types of evidence are important and useful, but they serve different roles, and give rise to different implications. Critically, they differ in what can be inferred from them. In short, strong research evidence means an approach is more likely to work in more settings (with the right conditions and the right implementation approach). Strong practice evidence means an approach is working in one setting, holds promise for other settings, and warrants further research. Box I below on Evidence for Learning’s evidence hierarchy explains this concept further.

Ultimately, education evidence is valuable when it is used in service of good decision-making. We want educators to have access to appropriate data and evidence to make wise choices about how they work to improve education outcomes. We expect this would involve both research evidence and practice evidence – but also requires that educators understand what can and can’t be inferred from each. A strong evidence ecosystem can build and support this understanding, as it builds understanding of the evidence itself.

Because of the evolving nature of evidence as new trends, technologies and research emerge, and the complex and dynamic nature of classroom teaching, we believe that the most important role for

² Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), [Standards of evidence](#)

³ AERO, [Standards of evidence](#)

governments in education evidence is to support educators to make good decisions about practice informed by the latest and best available evidence, rather than by dictating specific strategies from the centre that practitioners are required to adopt.

Rigorous summaries of the research evidence can support wise decision-making by school leaders on how to spend school funds. In England, for example, school leaders must demonstrate that they have engaged with the independent evidence base from the Education Endowment Foundation when selecting which approaches to use for their Pupil Premium funding. Supporting decision-making in this case involves giving school leaders access to rigorous, independent and systematically-created evidence bases and professional support to use them, not by dictating specific strategies for them to use.

Box 1: An evidence hierarchy

Different types of evidence serve different roles and give rise to different implications. Evidence for Learning’s evidence hierarchy can assist in explain these roles and implications.

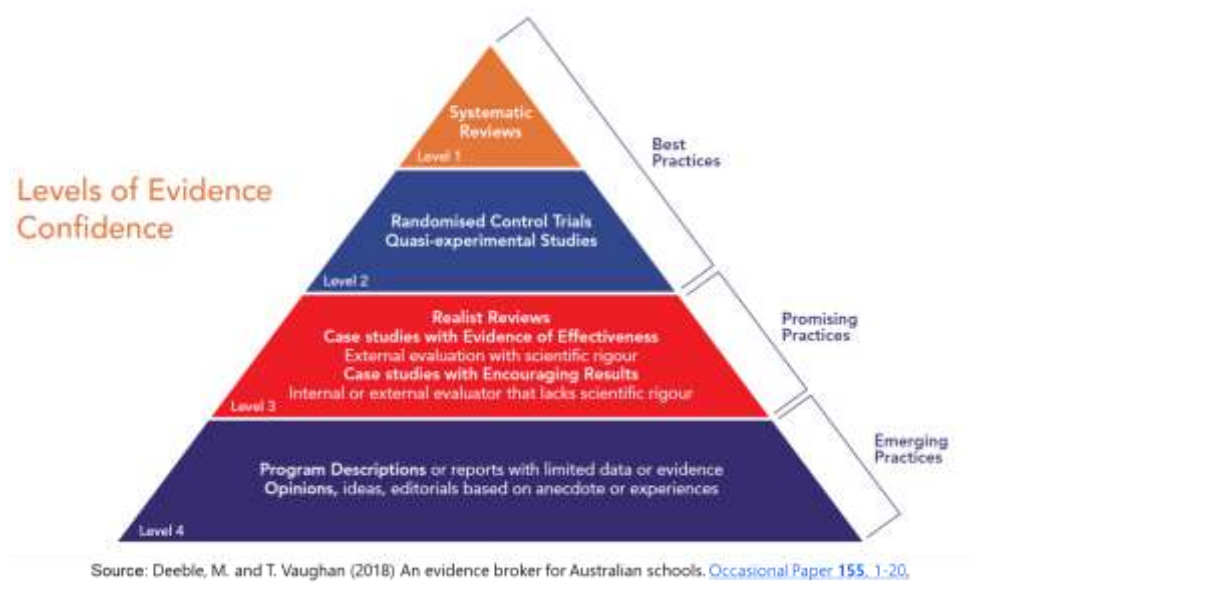
The most robust evidence -- at level 1 of the hierarchy in the diagram below – is from repeatable findings from multiple studies, such as evidence contained in systematic reviews.

Different types of evidence can be critically assessed, moving from personal experience and the anecdotal at Level 4, through to case studies with defined measures and results at Level 3, up to experimental studies testing for causation at Level 2 and finally to Level 1.

Even the best innovations begin with limited evidence of impact which are then supported and validated (or discounted) over time with increasing degrees of rigour and confidence.

In some areas, such as the evidence base on teaching reading, there is a well-established evidence base that can provide robust and precise research evidence for teachers to implement in their classrooms. Where there is not enough precise or robust evidence, professional discretion and ongoing evaluation of impact using practice evidence, especially at the local level, comes into play.

Figure 1: Evidence for Learning’s evidence hierarchy



1.3. Supporting and empowering educators

The 300,000+ workforce in Australian schools are one of the greatest influences on children's learning – educators are the key to improving outcomes for children and young people, especially those experiencing disadvantage. Because educators are key, we have to work on behavioural incentives and capability building mechanisms so they are empowered to be and see themselves as experts, confidently using evidence to make better decisions, dozens of times a day.

We know that a one-way 'push' of information is not sufficient for sustained change in practice. An extensive review on evidence-use across different sectors, conducted by University College London, showed that interventions that create awareness of research typically only impact on decision-making if they are accompanied by strategies that create capabilities, opportunities and motivation to act on that evidence.⁴ There has been a growing recognition in public services that simply 'packaging and posting' research is unlikely, by itself, to impact significantly on decision-making and behaviours.

It is relatively easy to target the willing participants who readily embrace research and data, but we have not yet succeeded in Australia in engaging 'the silent majority' of educators who are not confident to engage with research evidence or develop practice evidence. Because of the complexity of behaviour change, we risk shallow engagement or strong resistance if we mandate evidence use through simplistic solutions that do not support and empower educators in their day-to-day work. This does not mean that educators get to decide what is 'good' or 'bad' evidence or to cherry-pick the evidence that supports their existing views. It does mean that educators should be equipped to appreciate the strengths and limitations of different kinds of evidence, see using it as integral to their professional identity and know how to use evidence to make impactful decisions related to student outcomes.

The path to engaging the silent majority is to also stimulate the 'demand' from these educators (the pull factor), rather than just focus on the 'supply' of research evidence and data through publication and promotion (as a push factor). We know from the international experience of our global partners, including the Education Endowment Foundation, and the experience of Evidence for Learning in Australia, that stimulating demand requires⁵:

- trust from the profession
- an evidence agenda driven and co-created by educators
- and support for building capability in and empowering educators.

Trust: Government agencies are often seen by the education profession as an employer, funder and or regulator, rather than leaders of the profession. Australian research on evidence use shows that trust is a concern for many educators when considering government agencies. System actors outside the school generally ranked low as a trusted source of research, and government Departments of Education were perceived as their least trusted sources of research.⁶ Independence from government is advantageous for building trust with the profession, and there is a need to work with independent organisations in the system that already have the voice and trust of educators.

Co-creation: Often evidence for educators is produced as 'one-way traffic', with a set of evidence resources coming from a 'supplier' to the 'practitioners'. For educators to genuinely engage with

⁴ L Langer, J Tripney and D Gough, *The science of using science: Researching the use of research evidence in decision-making*, UCL Institute of Education, 2016

⁵ B Maxwell, J Sharples and M Coldwell, *Developing a systems-based approach to research use in education*, British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2022.

⁶ M Rickinson, L Walsh, J Gleeson, B Cutler and G Hall, *Using research well as a system: Q discussion paper*, Monash University, 2023, page 17. 'Government Departments of Education' were ranked 10th out of 10 options as a trusted source of research by the surveyed educators.

evidence and for that evidence to meet their needs, educators should have a chance to influence the creation of evidence resources and need to see themselves as 'demanders' of good evidence. This kind of co-production is recognised as a promising avenue by the OECD.⁷

It is not enough to just consult educators on their preferences, they need to be equal partners in driving the process. This can look like:

- Educators involved in setting what questions and priorities are researched;
- Educators setting the agenda and priorities for what evidence assets are produced based on what they currently need;
- Schools and early learning settings leading the design, pilot and evaluation of evidence-based teaching and learning solutions, such as through the [early stage development programme](#) facilitated by the Education Endowment Foundation in England;⁸
- Schools and early learning settings generating research by being supported with tools, technology and training to measure and share evidence of their own impact, or by participating in rigorous research such as Randomised Control Trials;
- Accredited, funded and supported schools (with deep expertise in using research evidence) coaching other schools to put rigorous research evidence into practice, such as in the [Research Schools Network](#) in England.⁹

Building capability: Changing behaviours in educators requires a wider range of activities, rather than just providing educators with evidence-based guidance. This work involves shaping beliefs, raising awareness, building knowledge and influencing behaviours.

Multi-stranded mobilisation activities that work together at different levels of the system are needed. This might include policies, communication strategies, incentives, peer networks, regional brokering, professional development and training and support for effective implementation.

Providing supports for schools on effective implementation and the importance of de-implementation – stopping less impactful activities – is important. The evidence is clear that high quality implementation is critical for any practice to prove effective.¹⁰ Even the best evidenced approaches can have a negative impact on student progress if they are poorly implemented.

1.4. The role of collaborative networks

Our experience with *The Connection* suggests that collaborative network design in systems contexts could be an effective mobilisation action strategy for moving evidence into practice.

We know that there is significant education expertise already within the education system, but it is often isolated in individuals or single schools. This expertise is a largely untapped asset that systems can use to improve practice more widely. Collective expertise and knowledge is generated by education staff collaborating through networks designed for amplifying impact. It is an important supportive strategy for education staff tackling complexity. When combined with other evidence mobilisation strategies described in this submission, it has potential for empowering educators and driving change.

Education in the current era is a collective responsibility and requires deep collaborative effort. Education staff need more systemic and supportive ways to learn together and collaborate effectively and efficiently, to both share and develop their expertise and knowledge informing their practices. The

⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), [Who cares about using education research in policy and practice?](#), OECD, 2022

⁸ S Mathers, [EEF blog: early stage development – explaining the rationale](#), Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), 2022.

⁹ Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), [Research Schools Network](#), EEF

¹⁰ Evidence for Learning, [Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#), Evidence for Learning, 2019

growing complexities facing education systems in teaching and learning practice is a shared concern. Responding to complexity requires the application of collective expertise and knowledge in new and responsive ways.¹¹

Collaborative network design builds from the premise of astute investment in school leaders. Investing in educational leadership quality through capacity building is an important leverage point in the education system. High quality leaders can enable or disable high quality teaching and learning through the daily decisions and choices they make for and with their teams in their work. Quality leaders at the school and district level are best placed to balance the overarching importance of equitable access to quality education, with the needs and strengths of the students and communities that they work with daily.¹²

Effective school and site leaders need an authorising environment that provides shared accountability for impact in a fast changing context. The work of The Connection in collaborative network design demonstrates that the opportunity to collaborate and share practice insights and knowledge in structured networks can provide an authorising environment with inbuilt collective accountability, and where site leaders use their collective expertise to translate high quality teaching actions into practices that are responsive to the needs of their students.¹³

Networks can also be designed to support educators facing specific issues, challenges and opportunities, such as those working in rural, remote and regional education settings; working with First Nations students and communities; and working in domains such as transitions from early years education to school or post school pathways.

There is a growing international body of research, case studies and evidence about the value of collaborative leadership within education systems supported by networked design, including the work of *The Connection* in Australia and elsewhere. It shows that collaborative leadership networks are important intermediaries for scaling change for system transformation;¹⁴ contribute to building social intelligence as a lever of school system success;¹⁵ and can bolster the collective capacity of the education system and profession to flourish in this time of uncertainty.¹⁶ Further information on these findings is at Attachment A.

The opportunity to build effective and functional collaborative system networks where impact can be measured and tracked is based on the principles and evidence of network science. Professor Alan Daly from the University of California has led important work globally in this field for over a decade.¹⁷ He continues to partner with the Connection to support design and measurement of impact.

In the Australian context, evaluation of The Connection initiative in collaborative network design found that it is an emerging, distinctive, and innovative model of collaboration for professional support across geographies and systems and that participating schools have become sites of innovation and collaboration.¹⁸ Other findings of this work include:

¹¹ Centre for Strategic Education (CSE), *Education reimaged: Leadership for transformation: Leading into the emerging future*, Centre for Strategic Education (CSE), 2022

¹² S Cridge, 'The power of collective leadership for learning', *Instructional leadership and leadership for learning in schools*, Palgrave Mac Millan, Switzerland, 2019

¹³ A Singhania, N Hard and T Bentley, *Unleashing the power of the collective in education: the impact evaluation of SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection*, RMIT University, 2020,3

¹⁴ D Istance, A Paniagua, R Winthrop and L Ziegler, *Learning to leapfrog: innovative pedagogies to transform education: summary findings: policy brief*, Center for Universal Education at Brookings, 2019; Education Commission, *Transforming the education workforce: learning teams for a learning generation*, Education Commission, 2020

¹⁵ M Fullan, *The right drivers for whole systems success*, CSE Leading Education Series, Centre for Strategic Education, 2021

¹⁶ CSE, *Education reimaged: Leadership for transformation: Leading into the emerging future*, CSE, 2022; CSE, *Education reimaged: leadership for a new era*, CSE, 2022

¹⁷ A Daly and J Brooks, 'Rethinking social networks for equity, excellence and flourishing', SVA Quarterly, 24 March 2022.

¹⁸ Singhania et al, *Unleashing the power of the collective in education: the impact evaluation of SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection*

- a collective leadership development network approach is effective in generating meaningful short-term and long-term education outcomes for disadvantaged learners and communities.
- participation in The Connection is having a high, if widely varied, impact on the collective capability of both principals and non-principals, on school-based and system-wide improvement practices and student learning in these disadvantaged communities.
- Findings reveal participants – including principals and non-principals — consistently report improvement in their knowledge and mindsets and frequently report that their motivation to share and contribute to outcomes and collaboration beyond their own school has increased.
- School sites across all three participating states evaluated had implemented a wide range of improvement practices.

Collaboration, when effectively embedded in a system, provides an authorising environment to share responsibility and act together with connected purpose and alignment. It has potential to build leadership capacity and shared accountability, and foster action that is responsive to the local context and tailored for learner cohort needs. It also supports alignment of teacher and leader professional voice, capability and expertise.

Building a culture of effective education ecosystem collaboration requires intentional action in an authorising environment at all levels of the education system. It is not enough to simply encourage collaboration without putting the right structures and incentives in place.

1.5. The role of government policy, national frameworks, and the NSRA

There is growing recognition of the impact that education system influences such as accountability policies and improvement priorities can have on research use in schools.¹⁹ Government policy, national frameworks and funding agreements can play an important role in encouraging and incentivising better use of evidence throughout the education system.

Meaningful use of education evidence by educators cannot be driven through regulation alone. Too much focus on compliance can diminish trust in a fragile ecosystem, disempower educators and stifle appropriate local adaptations to suit context and disciplined innovation. We need to use multiple policy levers, including funding and support for schools, networks to build educator capability, evidence 'guardianship' to improve evidence quality and accountability, and system stewardship to steer all participants in the system towards high-quality evidence use.

Social Ventures Australia, and Evidence for Learning, strongly advocated for the creation of a national evidence education body in Australia.²⁰ The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is a great asset, and is helping to create a stronger focus on evidence across Australian school systems.

However, our engagement in Australia and overseas with the next generation of evidence mobilisation activity shows that there are additional layers of activity across the entire system needed if we're going to see change in schools. Systematic reviews of knowledge mobilisation approaches show the benefit of multi-stranded strategies that work at different levels of change from practitioner to regional and national policy levels.²¹

¹⁹ Godfrey, D., & Brown, C. (Eds.) (2019). An ecosystem for research-engaged schools: Reforming education through research. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203701027>

²⁰ SVA's submissions to the Productivity Commission inquiry into the education evidence base were cited extensively in the Commission's final report. See Productivity Commission, *Education evidence base inquiry report*, Productivity Commission, 2017. Our work was also recognised in the Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools, which recommended the creation of an independent institution for education research and evidence. See Department of Education and Training, *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools*, Australian Government, 2018.

²¹ L Langer et al., *The science of using science: researching the use of research evidence in decision-making*

Using evidence well needs to be everybody's role, not just governments', if we want to achieve excellence and equity across the Australian education ecosystem.

Independent organisations and intermediaries outside of government can do some of the work that is hard for systems, government and government-led organisations to do. Intermediaries can work with schools to build capability, support networks of research schools to share evidence, and conduct independent research trials. Independent organisations such as principal and teacher associations, professional learning providers and non-government organisations often already have extensive networks of educators and trust from these professionals.

Government has an important role to play in stewarding the multiple individuals, organisations and agencies in the Australian education system towards high-quality, long-term use of evidence to improve outcomes. This kind of 'system stewardship' is a networked form of governance with a focus on collaboration and ties between individuals and agencies involving collective effort carried out at all levels.²² The Front Project has published a case for system stewardship in Australia's ECEC system that has lessons for better evidence stewarding in Australian' education ecosystem more broadly.²³ These lessons include focusing on how the system values and creates a vision and culture of evidence use, increasing data and evidence sharing, actively facilitating the market for evidence-related products and practices (including professional learning providers), developing clear lines of responsibility, and ensuring that local approaches meet local needs without sacrificing quality standards.

1.6. Using the NSRA to drive evidence mobilisation

A focus on building demand is required to support and empower educators to use evidence. We recommend four initiatives for inclusion in the next NSRA give more ownership to educators on evidence generation and mobilisation:

- Governments should establish a national School Innovation Fund that supports educators and schools to generate high-quality evidence on initiatives with potential for scale, with a focus on issues and contexts relevant to improving equity in student outcomes
- Governments should create and establish a series of focussed and active practitioner collaboration networks to both mobilise and amplify practice-based evidence and create the next iteration of evidence-informed practice to respond to rapidly changing education contexts.
- Governments should seek to steward quality evidence use by investing in capability building, and incentivising partnerships between government agencies and independent organisations that can help to build demand for better evidence from educators
- Governments should support independent 'evidence guardians' in key areas of school expenditure to improve investment decisions. In the first instance, governments should establish an 'evidence guardian' for educator professional learning

1.6.1. National School Innovation Fund

Recommendation 1.1: Governments should establish a national School Innovation Fund that supports educators and schools to generate high-quality evidence on initiatives with potential for scale, with a focus on issues and contexts relevant to improving equity in student outcomes

Governments could establish a \$100M national education evidence pipeline fund for schools to design, pilot and evaluate evidence-led solutions to improve teaching and learning and wellbeing

²² K Dickinson, From New Public Management to New Public Governance: The implications for a 'new public service', 2016 [DOI: 10.22459/TSS.07.2016.03](https://doi.org/10.22459/TSS.07.2016.03).

²³ The Front Project, [The case for system stewardship in Australia's early childhood education and care system](#), The Front Project, 2022

outcomes for Australian students. This fund would start with what we already know to build a better pipeline of evidence-led teaching and learning approaches and practices on priority topics for schools in order to improve learning, development and wellbeing outcomes.

It would support evidence generation led by schools to create relevant, usable and robust evidence where there are current gaps in our knowledge on specific teaching and learning approaches and practices. This in turn would empower educators, including them as a core part of the evidence generation cycle and thus the evidence ecosystem.

This fund could:

- Create an **Evidence Pipeline Reference Council** to oversee the deployment of the fund, including setting selection criteria for schools and organisation partners, priority topics for funding rounds, quality assurance and evaluation. This Council should consist of educators, education researchers and policymakers to help define practical education research priorities related to teaching and learning practices and approaches. At least half of the Council should be made up of practitioners to ensure the priorities are related to current practice challenges and opportunities in schools.
- Conduct a national selection process to select a number of schools with capability, capacity and credentials to identify and apply rigorous research evidence, as well as collect and analyse practice-based evidence and data. A national selection process would also be undertaken to appoint a panel of available 'design, pilot and evaluation' organisation partners to support schools to do this work.
- Fund selected schools with \$100,000-\$200,000 per year over 3-5 years to select and work with an accredited 'design, pilot and evaluation' partner from a list of approved organisations to support the process in schools.
- Fund selected schools with \$100,000-\$200,000 per year over 3-5 years to relieve staff to give them time to work with an organisation partner to design, pilot and evaluate solutions within promising areas of evidence.
- Fund infrastructure **to support this national work**, such as evaluation technology, tools and better data and information sharing.

All participants— schools and organisation partners— would go through a rigorous selection process to ensure they had the research, design and evaluation expertise to support rigorous, evidence-led education pilots. Funding allocated for schools and partners could be adjusted according to the level of complexity and disadvantage of their setting.

Rather than funding individual research projects or ideas, the fund could prioritise certain topics in funding rounds or programs of research areas, especially those focussing on closing equity and disadvantage gaps. Funding rounds could include improving the use of technology to support more impactful teaching and learning, or closing the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students in middle years literacy and numeracy. Specific projects funded could involve supporting explicit vocabulary instruction to reduce vocabulary gaps between students experiencing disadvantage and their peers, or using modelling and worked examples to support students with problem-solving in middle years mathematics.

The 'pipeline' nature of the fund could be used to build evidence over time with increasing degrees of scale and rigor. Promising practices, informed by the evidence and with potential for scale, could be designed, piloted and evaluated in one school and then, over time, rolled out to and evaluated in a slowly increasing number of schools if they are showing evidence of promise in relation to their theory of change, potential for impact on learning or wellbeing, and feasibility.

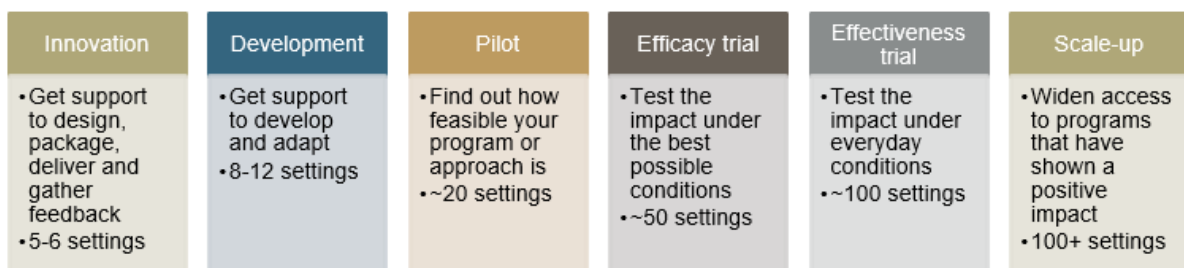
Although outside the scope of the NSRA's remit, the fund could also support similar projects in other education-related domains, such as in early learning settings.

This model has been trialled in Research Schools in England by the Education Endowment Foundation.²⁴ In this model, schools receive:

- A structured process and resources to aid design and the collection of early formative feedback
- Understanding of the best available global and national research evidence around the content area and around implementation and professional development
- A fixed grant to support development, including developing a theory of change to consider what is necessary to achieve the desired change.
- And schools are required to (with support):
- Design and develop their solution and relevant materials
- Lead the recruitment of 3-5 other schools/ settings to participate in the pilot
- Design tools to collect evaluative feedback from participating schools and settings
- Deliver their solution and collect feedback; and collect insights and overall reflections on delivery.

If the evaluation is positive, the solution can progress through further stages of development and evaluation in a broader number of settings, as per the EEF evaluation pipeline (see Figure II). Over time, the EEF expects this model will support the development of more evidence-based solutions that can be rigorously evaluated, ultimately offering more options for settings and educators looking to improve outcomes for all children and young people, especially the most disadvantaged.

Figure II: The EEF evaluation pipeline, which describes what types of projects and evaluations are funded by the EEF



This kind of model supports a ‘disciplined innovation’ approach to generating new evidence about the most impactful teaching and learning approaches and practices for improving student learning and wellbeing outcomes.²⁵ It starts with what we already know from existing research evidence bases – which saves time and increases the chances of success. It also ensures that the innovation is properly evaluated to determine whether it created genuine improvement, and then supports sharing of what works with other schools so that effective practices can be scaled and sustained.

²⁴ EEF, *Research Schools Network*, EEF, accessed 2 August 2023.

²⁵ K Collins, *Innovating with impact in education*, SVA Quarterly, 7 June 2015

1.6.2. Stronger collaborative networks for educators

Recommendation 1.2: Governments should create and establish a series of focussed and active practitioner collaboration networks to both mobilise and amplify practice-based evidence

Governments should establish a ‘collaborative networks’ workstream in the next NSRA, with a view to having multiple collaborative networks of education practitioners operating within and across jurisdictions. Within the workstream, governments should map existing networks, determine priorities and gaps, document best practice for establishing them, and fund the creation of new networks. These networks should be designed to mobilise and amplify evidence in practice, and feed into the broader evidence ecosystem.

A networked systems approach to mobilising and generating evidence focuses on the education practitioner; provides opportunity to include professional voice; leverages and links experience, knowledge and expertise across education systems; and provides opportunity to work collaboratively for efficiency and amplified impact. It generates and embeds educator capability to both use and generate evidence in practice. Influencers are generated through strategic collaborative network design to model and lead the evidence informed practices, modelling and engaging others as they act. The network approach combines the principles of responsive education practice that is both supportive and acknowledges the importance and value of the Australian education workforce.

Our experience with the Connection has found that successful collaborative networks share a set of four characteristics and four conditions, as shown in Table I below. Governments should consider how these characteristics and conditions can best be cultivated in existing and new practitioner networks.

Table I: Characteristics and conditions of successful collaborative networks²⁶

Characteristics	Conditions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared moral purpose across the diverse group of actors • A culture of trust and safe environment • Collective accountability for shared success and impact • Willingness to learn, share and exchange expertise by inclusive participation and structured inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An explicit and shared improvement agenda • Access to resources, including infrastructure, human and financial • Close integration between system policy priority areas and network priorities • Active, strategic alignment between the system and networks planning and accountability frameworks

Governments could establish multiple networks, convened around priority issues of practice. For example, The Connection has engaged with networks focused on culturally nourishing schools for First Nations students, on rural, regional and remote education, and on digital literacy and STEM. Ideally networks would cross system and jurisdictional boundaries, building collaborative engagement beyond the usual peer cohort of individual school leaders. Networks could be established for a 3-5 year cycle, enabling wider participation for more educators over time.

²⁶ Singhania et al, *Unleashing the power of the collective in education: the impact evaluation of SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection*

1.6.3. Better stewardship by government to steer all participants in the education system towards high-quality evidence use

Recommendation 1.3: Governments should seek to steward quality evidence use by investing in capability building, and incentivising partnerships between government agencies and independent organisations that can help to build demand for better evidence from educators.

Improving the use of research evidence requires approaches that build connections between different activities, actors and levels to form effective 'evidence ecosystems'.²⁷

System stewardship is a holistic approach to governance involving responsible management and supervision, exercising care and consideration.²⁸ It acknowledges the complex and adaptive nature of systems like the Australian education system. A good steward provides a form of leadership that involves creating a long-term vision, ensuring accountability, and building trust and capacity with other actors in the system. Stewardship is cyclical and iterative, involving feedback and improvement towards system goals.

There are some existing elements of good system stewardship by governments in relation to evidence use in the Australian education system. These include national partnerships, rules and minimum standards, and forums for co-ordination and co-operation.²⁹ However, there is also potential to enhance elements of stewardship in relation to better evidence use within the current system structures.

An important element of good system stewardship enables the distribution of responsibilities between multiple stewards at different levels within the system, rather than a single entity. Good stewardship seeks a balance between decentralisation and a more regulated top-down delivery model which recognises the strengths of different actors by empowering them in targeted roles as appropriate.³⁰

Using evidence well needs to be the role of everybody, not just government. The system of actors that support educators in Australian education needs to be incentivised and supported to use rigorous evidence so that the educators that they work with are equipped and empowered to make wise choices to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Among other actions, enhanced system stewardship of evidence use in the Australian education system involves:

- Increased government investment in capability building across the system of policymakers and education organisations on the value, purpose and definition of good quality, rigorous evidence, including building knowledge of the different forms of evidence that are appropriate for different purposes.
- Consideration of complexity and level of disadvantage of the setting when commissioning and funding evidence generation, translation and mobilisation in order to prioritise and provide appropriate levels of additional funding to support evidence-related work in schools experiencing complex disadvantage
- More intentional commissioning of work funded by governments to consider the right mix of independent organisations and government agencies to undertake different types of work which best contribute to the overall health and performance of the system in relation to evidence use.

²⁷ A Boaz and S Nutley, 'Using evidence', *What works now? Evidence informed policy and practice*, Policy Press, 2019.

²⁸ K. Moon, D Marsh, H Dickinson H and G Carey, *Is all stewardship equal? Developing a typology of stewardship approaches*, Public Service Research Group Issues Paper Series: Issues Paper No. 2. University of New South Wales, 2017

²⁹ The Front Project, *The case for system stewardship in Australia's early childhood education and care system*

³⁰ The Front Project, *The case for system stewardship in Australia's early childhood education and care system*

- Support for 'evidence guardians' to improve evidence quality and accountability (discussed further in Section 1.6.4 below)

Governments at federal and state levels should consider commissioning -- and creating funding incentives for others to commission -- organisations that have direct connections to practitioners. There are many independent organisations, professional associations and other intermediaries in Australian education that hold the trust of Australian educators and are thus able to effectively influence and support educators to use evidence to inform their practice. Independent organisations that hold the trust of the profession and use rigorous research evidence and evidence-based methods should receive additional funding and supportive policy conditions to scale evidence use across the Australian education system.

This type of investment could involve incentivising many co-designed, power-sharing, systematic school improvement partnerships between government agencies and independent organisations, as well as providing direct funding to independent organisations that have large educator networks and are committed to using rigorous research evidence on teaching and learning approaches and practices.

Appropriate vetting and accountability would be required to ensure these organisations were committed to using rigorous research evidence in both their content and approaches, and had independent evidence of their impact on teaching practice and contribution to improving student learning and wellbeing outcomes. An example of these types of evidence-led partnerships, where independent organisations are supported to partner with schools on evidence mobilisation in England, is outlined below.

This investment could lead to significantly more educators using high-quality evidence to inform their decisions and thus improving their impact on student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Box II: Education Endowment Foundation funds and supports meaningful evidence mobilisation and professional learning through 'strategic partners'

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is the UK's national 'what works centre' for education. Their new regional partnerships strategy is informed by ten years of supporting evidence mobilisation in schools in England.

The overarching purpose of the EEF's regional and school improvement partnerships is to close the achievement gap for students experiencing disadvantage. The EEF funds independent regional organisations called 'strategic partners' to partner with schools to mobilise evidence. These partnerships are required to:

- Support evidence-informed improvement in teaching and learning approaches and practices through meaningful and sustained behaviour change
- Build the capability of schools, settings and systems to be self-sustaining in their engagement with research evidence
- Develop coherence and co-ordination in the use of evidence, to support and complement local, regional and state/territory school improvement approaches.
- Exemplify evidence in action through deep, embedded partnerships that enable improved understanding of evidence mobilisation and the sharing of this learning across the system.

These partnerships typically involve a combination of tailored professional development, access to evidence-based interventions and practices, implementation planning and ongoing support over a sustained period.

The evidence used in these partnerships is based on the evidence base contained in independent systematic reviews of the global research literature as described in the EEF's Teaching & Learning Toolkit, Early Years Toolkit, Guidance Reports and supporting resources, including Putting Evidence to Work: A Schools' Guide to Implementation, which identifies a range of leadership knowledge, behaviours, and actions that are associated with effective implementation.

1.6.4. 'Evidence guardianships' to improve evidence quality and accountability

Recommendation 1.4: Governments should support independent 'evidence guardians' in key areas of school expenditure to improve investment decisions. In the first instance, governments should establish an 'evidence guardian' for educator professional learning

In addition to capability building and targeted commissioning, governments can enhance their stewardship of evidence use in Australian education through support of independent organisations to act as 'evidence guardians' in key areas where schools invest large portions of their discretionary budget. The 'evidence guardian' in key areas could package and present the best research evidence in that area, review and rate relevant service providers on the evidence claims in support of their offer and assist schools to consider the relevance of the claims for their needs and context. They could also advise system stakeholders on evidence standards and the necessary thresholds for using evidence, as well as the fidelity of evidence use in particular frameworks, programs and initiatives. They can act as a means of independent quality assurance of evidence standards, providing some accountability for the use of the term 'evidence-based' - which is currently used loosely, with varying definitions and degrees of fidelity, throughout the Australian education system.

Government could give these organisations a remit to establish independent mechanisms and incentives to empower evidence-based decision-making by educational policymakers and practitioners by helping policymakers and practitioners to identify and understand which claims of 'evidence-based' are accurate and trustworthy.

Based on the experience of the Education Endowment Foundation in England, good evidence guardianship involves:

- **Establishing independence:** It is important that evidence guardians are independent from jurisdictional activities and delivery providers, including government. This ensures that the evidence guardian can judge the quality of evidence through an objective, non-partisan lens that is not swayed by political preferences or biases. It helps build trust with educators and other education sector stakeholders.
- **Robust evidence standards:** The evidence guardian should agree and publish objective standards for judging evidence quality and should use strict criteria to assess the type and use of evidence and claims that can be made from it.³¹

Box III: The Education Endowment Foundation as an independent evidence guardian

The Education Endowment Foundation -- as an independent organisation -- ensures statutory and non-statutory policy frameworks on national teacher development programs led by the Department for Education in England are underpinned by robust evidence and that that evidence is applied according to research findings. To undertake this work, the EEF independently reviews, assesses and endorses the contents of the frameworks, such as the Early Career Framework and the National Professional Qualifications. They do this by applying criteria for the inclusion of references and the claims that can be made from these references, prioritising the inclusion of systematic research with transparent

³¹ EEF, *Evidence guardianship: Embedding national teacher development in the best available evidence*, EEF, forthcoming

methodologies depending on the quality of evidence available. The EEF works closely with the Department for Education in England to undertake this work, building their research literacy to help them make better use of research evidence in decision-making, whilst maintaining independence and autonomy in their quality assurance role. The EEF also reviews training materials designed by program developers using the content of the frameworks – this ensures the framework references are used in a way that is faithful to the underlying evidence and that any content added to programs does not contradict the claims made in the frameworks.

Professional learning provision is one area in Australian education that is ripe for improving quality and accountability in relation to claims about evidence use. Schools invest significant time and resources into a mostly market-driven system where providers make claims about evidence and impact to improve their sales. Other areas that might be considered are:

- teaching and learning software and online services
- wellbeing and social and emotional learning programs.
- neurodiversity and inclusive education programs and services

We recommend that the NSRA create an independent, national 'evidence guardian' organisation with the task of vetting and accrediting professional learning programs as 'evidence-based', to supplement existing state and territory professional learning accreditation processes (where applicable).

Professional learning and development programs for educators and educational leaders should be assessed against a rigorous set of evidence standards and criteria, including whether they:

- Use rigorous, evidence-based content based on systematic research with transparent methodologies, such as that in Evidence for Learning's Toolkits³² and Guidance Reports³³
- Incorporate professional learning mechanisms based on the latest evidence on effective professional development, such as that in Evidence for Learning's Effective Professional Development Guidance Report (see Box IV below)
- Support schools on how to effectively implement and sustain change as based on the evidence such as that in Evidence for Learning's Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation³⁴

This kind of initiative would lead to less wasted time and funding on ineffective professional learning and ineffective teaching approaches and practices supported by professional learning providers, making teacher development more effective and efficient, and ultimately improving learning and wellbeing outcomes. These kind of 'evidence guardians', as independent organisations, would be led by the evidence and thus more likely to be trusted by the profession.

Box IV: Mechanisms of effective professional development

The Education Endowment Foundation commissioned a robust review of the global evidence on effective professional development, as defined as 'structured and facilitated activity for teachers intended to increase their teaching ability'.³⁵

The review found that professional development, on average, has a positive effect on student achievement across primary and secondary contexts.

³² Evidence for Learning, [Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#).

³³ Evidence for Learning, [Guidance Reports](#).

³⁴ Evidence for Learning, [Putting evidence to work: a school's guide to implementation](#), Evidence for Learning, 2019

³⁵ EEF, [Review identifying the characteristics of more effective professional development](#), EEF, 2023

The review identifies mechanisms of professional development that are more likely to lead to this impact. These mechanisms can be in various forms and programs of professional development. Where professional development features a mechanism from each of the groups in the diagram below, it may be more likely to be effective.

This kind of evidence base can be used to assess whether professional learning programs are evidence-based and thus more likely to have impact on teacher practice and student outcomes.

Figure III: The mechanisms of effective professional development as summarised in E4L's Guidance Report on Effective Professional Development³⁶



Build knowledge

- Managing cognitive load
- Revisiting prior learning



Motivate staff

- Setting and agreeing on goals
- Presenting information from a credible source
- Providing affirmation and reinforcement after progress



Develop teaching techniques

- Instructing teachers on how to perform a technique
- Arranging social support
- Modelling the technique
- Monitoring and providing feedback
- Rehearsing the technique



Embed practice

- Providing prompts and cues
- Promoting action planning
- Encouraging monitoring
- Prompting context-specific repetition

³⁶ Evidence for Learning, [Guidance report: effective professional development](#), Evidence for Learning, 2022

2. Responses to questions from the Consultation Paper

2.1. Improving student mental health and wellbeing

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?

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

We would like to draw the Panel's attention to E4L's Student Health and Wellbeing Systematic Review, which summarises the best available evidence on this question.³⁷

In 2020, Evidence for Learning (E4L), VicHealth and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) partnered to test the widely-held belief that 'kids [experiencing positive wellbeing] are better learners'.

E4L and VicHealth commissioned a systematic review to explore the effectiveness of school-based wellbeing interventions on improving academic and non-academic outcomes of children and young people in mainstream schools. The systematic review, conducted by the ACER, explored the global research of wellbeing programs, identifying a range of outcomes (432) both academic (literacy, numeracy and general) and those related to wellbeing (social-emotional adjustment, behavioural adjustments, cognitive adjustments and internalising symptoms).

The programs explored were those which had been rigorously evaluated, either through RCTs or quasi-experimental methodologies, which reflects the best available evidence.

The review found that the provision of school-based wellbeing programs had small to moderate positive impacts on student academic achievement and wellbeing related measures when compared to similar students in control groups engaged in their usual activities with general academic performance. Of the wellbeing outcomes explored, interventions that developed social-emotional skills had the greatest impact on wellbeing overall.

- The subsequent report highlighted that the programs which showed the greatest promise tended to have the following characteristics:
- Were universal with a focus on building capacity of the whole school community.
- Delivered over a short period, such as a term, which allowed schools to deliver the program with fidelity.
- Delivered to groups of students from 11 to full classroom size, and on a regular basis.
- Delivered by well-trained classroom teachers who had received specific professional development for the program to build the teachers capacity first.
- Developmentally differentiated – recognising that wellbeing is influenced by stages in life, particularly during transition and adolescence.

Importantly, the research indicated that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may benefit most from a combination of universal whole-school programs supported by targeted programs, however this is an area that would benefit from more in-depth exploration. The report highlighted the need for more high-quality program evaluations across Australia to identify programs that show promise and to validate those that are widely used.

³⁷ K Dix, SK Ahmed, T Carslake, S Sniedze, E O'Grady and J Trevitt, [Student health and wellbeing: A systematic review of intervention research examining effective student wellbeing in schools and their academic outcomes](#), Evidence for Learning, 2020



We would be pleased to discuss the content of the systematic review further with the Panel if that is of interest.

Recommendation 2.1: That the Panel consider the best available evidence on what works in formulating its approach to improving student mental health and wellbeing.

2.2. Attracting and retaining teachers

Question 15: What change(s) would attract more students into the teaching profession?

Question 16: What change(s) would support teachers to remain in the profession?

Question 17: What change(s) would support qualified teachers to return to the profession?

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

Question 21: What reforms could enable the existing teacher workforce to be deployed more effectively?

A recent exploratory review of the global literature conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation and re-published in Australia by Evidence for Learning found 28 factors related to the recruitment, retention and distribution of quality teachers to schools serving disadvantaged communities.³⁸ These factors are grouped into three categories in Table II below.

Table II Factors that contribute to the recruitment, retention and distribution of quality teachers to schools serving disadvantaged communities

System-level factors	School-level factors	Individual-level factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial incentives Local labour markets Accountability Alternative routes to teaching Desegregation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workload/working conditions Induction & mentoring Effective school leaders Collaboration with colleagues Professional development Relationships with parents and students Autonomy Discipline, behaviour Status School climate Leadership opportunities Support staff and resources Focus on learning Performance policy School characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intrinsic motivation Efficacy Local connections Fitting in Vocation Emotional factors Personality traits Cultural awareness

Several school-level factors appeared important and have a medium-high weight of evidence including workload and working conditions; induction support, coaching and mentoring; effective school leaders;

³⁸ EEF. [Exploratory evidence review on teacher recruitment and retention](#), EEF, 2023

and collaboration with colleagues. At the system-level, financial incentive was the factor with the highest weight of evidence.

There are gaps in this body of literature and future research should be conducted into workload reduction initiatives; induction coaching or mentoring programs; professional development for school leaders; opportunities for professional collaboration, such as co-planning or learning communities; and flexible working initiatives.

We would be pleased to discuss the content of the systematic review further with the Panel if that is of interest.

Recommendation 2.2: That the Panel consider the best available evidence on what works in formulating its approach to attracting and retaining teachers

On the specific issue of teacher retention in schools most in need, we see a need for greater support for educators in vulnerable communities, given the growing complexities of education practice and leadership. Our experience working with this cohort of educators through The Connection has shown us that there is a risk of professional isolation in these contexts, and that there is a lack of access to relevant professional development and supports that are contextually responsive and at point of need.³⁹

Isolation in teaching and leading school communities has compounding impacts and reduces opportunities and professional agency. Research suggests that it has a significant impact on education practices and the decisions and choices educators in these contexts make, and how they perceive both challenges and opportunities.⁴⁰ Other research demonstrates that autonomy and motivation increase job satisfaction and impact capability.⁴¹ Effective support system structures should be designed to challenge, grow, recognise, and acknowledge the expertise and capabilities of the professionals in a respectful and inclusive workplace culture.

Building stronger embedded support systems is a promising approach to retention of high quality educators in high-needs context. Our experience has shown that collaborative networks of school leaders, such as those facilitated by The Connection, can provide the structure to achieve both connection and support.⁴² Further information about the Connection can be found in Part 1 of this submission above, and in Appendix A.

Collaboration networks designed for both regular peer to peer and across system interactions can provide nuanced professional support at point of need. These networks can be curated around priority issues, capturing the opportunity to empower and engage educators authentically and with meaning that is aligned and responsive to their priority work. The support cultivates confidence and the motivation within the profession necessary to drive improvement momentum. Increased professional motivation and engagement underpins the conditions conducive to workforce retention.⁴³

³⁹ K Beswick, P Roberts, S Eacott, R Holden, D Alonzo, N Downes, L Mularczyk, T Loughland, S Cridge, E Corbyn and M Bedford, *Rural and regional education project: Final report*. UNSW Gonski Institute for Education and School of Education prepared for the NSW Department of Education, 2023

⁴⁰ N Downes, P Roberts and J Dean, *Researching the schoolhouse: Rethinking research on the staffing of rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia (2000-2019)*. Rural Education and Communities research group, University of Canberra, Centre for Sustainable Communities Monograph Series No. 3, 2021

⁴¹ P Riley, S-M See, H Marsh and T Dicke, *The Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey*, Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University, 2021

⁴² Singhania et al., *Unleashing the power of the collective in education: the impact evaluation of SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection*

⁴³ Beswick et al., *Rural and regional education project: Final report*; Singhania et al., *Unleashing the power of the collective in education: the impact evaluation of SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection*

The practice principles of collaboration networks are consistent with the recommendations for improvement actions in rural, remote, and regional education,⁴⁴ and align with the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan*, priority 4⁴⁵

Recommendation 2.3: That the Panel consider the opportunities offered by investment in networked collaboration peer support structures across school communities that are designed for school leaders and teachers to share professional support, expertise, knowledge and practice at point of need.

Question 24: How should digital technology be used to support education delivery, reduce teacher workload and improve teacher effectiveness? What examples are you aware of?

Digital technology can have a positive impact on learning, but how the technology is used is key to those benefits being realised. A 2019 review of the global research evidence found that the benefits of technology depend on a range of factors including the context, the subject area, the content, the pedagogy, access to technology, training and support, the length of the intervention, and how it is integrated with other classroom teaching.⁴⁶ The review found that supplementing standard teaching rather than replacing it with technology interventions can have the most positive impact.

Guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation, based on this global evidence review, recommends the following when using digital technology to improve learning:⁴⁷

- Schools should consider the pedagogical rationale for how technology will improve learning - the principles of how to use technology successfully are not distinct from questions of how to teach effectively or how children learn.
- Technology has the potential to help teachers explain and model new concepts and ideas, but how these are conveyed is less important than their clarity, relevance and accessibility to students, and often technology-supported explanations and modelling is more effective when used as a supplement rather than a substitute.
- Technology has the potential to increase the quality and quantity of practice that students undertake in and outside the classroom, including supporting retrieval practice and self-quizzing to help with retention of key ideas and knowledge. However, it is important to monitor how students are using technology including whether they have the skills they need to use it effectively to reduce the risk that technology becomes a tool that widens the gap between successful learners and their peers.
- Technology can improve assessment and feedback, which are important elements of effective teaching, as long as it improves how teachers use information from assessments and how students act on feedback, which is more important than the way in which this information is collected and delivered. Technology can also reduce teachers' workload by increasing the accuracy and speed of gathering assessment information.
- Successful implementation of technology requires training, time and resources, ongoing support, and consideration of upfront and ongoing costs.

We would be pleased to discuss the content of the EEF's review and implementation guidance further with the Panel if that is of interest.

Recommendation 2.4: That the Panel consider the best available evidence on what works in formulating its approach to using digital technology to improve learning

⁴⁴ Beswick et al., *Rural and regional education project: Final report*

⁴⁵ Department of Education, *National teacher workforce action plan*, Australian Government, 2022

⁴⁶ C Lewin, A Smith, S Morris and E Craig, *Using digital technology to improve learning: evidence review*, EEF, 2019

⁴⁷ EEF, *Guidance report: Using digital technology to improve learning*, EEF 2021

2.3. Data collection, sharing and reporting

Question 27: Is there any data not currently collected and reported on that is vital to understanding education in Australia? Why is this data important?

Question 30: 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?

Question 32: Should an independent body be responsible for collecting and holding data? What rules should be in place to govern the sharing of data through this body?

SVA shares the views expressed in the Consultation Paper that data collection and reporting is important for improving our understanding of system performance and can help lift student outcomes.

While there is a large amount of data collected in education systems across the country, the majority of the data is not in a form that can be used effectively by system actors interested in what is happening in more than one system – whether than be across jurisdictions, or across other areas of activity relevant to school education, such as early learning or child welfare. Data is held by a number of different government agencies – ranging from those operating within the school education system, to agencies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission, and the Australian Taxation Office. Linking this data, and making it available to policymakers and researchers, is one way to make better use of data without increasing the administrative burden on educators.

The Commonwealth Government is currently undertaking a range of activity relevant to data collection, including the government's Data and Digital Strategy, the newly announced Outcomes Fund, and the establishment of the Australian Centre for Evaluation. There are also efforts ongoing in various states, and in the for-purpose sector more broadly, to make data more available and usable. The Panel should consider how efforts to improve and reform school education data can align with these efforts, to avoid the creation of new overlaps and gaps in data availability.

Recommendation 2.5: That the Panel consider how changes to data collection and reporting under the new NSRA can be aligned with other efforts within and outside government to improve data availability and sharing

SVA has been involved in two pieces of work that may be relevant to the Panel's consideration of data issues. Both draw on our work in early learning, and overlap with school education.

Restacking the Odds

Restacking the Odds aims to drive equitable outcomes by ensuring that children and families can access a combination of high-quality, evidence-informed, community-based services.⁴⁸ The initiative's unique approach uses data and evidence-based indicators to focus on *how* to work differently to improve outcomes for children, families and communities. The early years of school (defined as Reception through to Year 3) is one of the five platforms it investigates.

To track how services are actually being delivered, there is value in collecting and actively using data at a community, service-provider and practitioner level. The Restacking the Odds project proposes equipping those designing and delivering early years services, including teachers and school leaders in the early years of school (to Year 3) with leading indicator data to measure how services are

⁴⁸ The initiative is a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health (Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI)), Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Bain & Company. The Restacking the Odds collaboration has provided its own submission to the Panel,

meeting the needs of children and families in a local area and inform the actions that can make a difference.

Lead indicators allow practitioners and other stakeholders to regularly assess performance and progress, and course-correct when required. While outcome data is the ultimate arbiter of success, lead indicators about what families and children are actually experiencing allows services to make timely adjustments and accumulate learning regularly, rather than waiting years to see outcomes.

Table III: Example of lead indicator in the early years of school

Lead Indicator	Potential Action	Outcome Indicator
Proportion of P-3 classroom teachers that provide parents with strategies to use when reading with children at home	Ensure teachers are provided with appropriate reading and learning packs to use at home	Proportion of children at expected level in reading (NAPLAN)

Restacking the Odds has identified evidence-based quality indicators for the early years of school. Quantity and participation are expected to be in line with state and territory legislation for compulsory schooling. The indicators are tied to school processes (i.e. process indicators at the classroom, student or lesson level that contribute to the achievement of high-quality outcomes) and teaching staff competencies (i.e. provider indicators). The full set of indicators is available in the Restacking the Odds Indicator Guide.

The identification of evidence-based indicators provides a potential framework to guide quality in schools. Populating the indicators gives practitioners data to better understand performance and select quality improvement initiatives. Embedding lead indicators of quality in the NSRA measurement framework has potential to elicit an array of benefits including:

- At the school/classroom level for continuous improvement, including early intervention.
- At the state or system level to inform decisions on resourcing and support for schools and at the regional level to create learning collaboratives to drive systemic change in response to local context.
- Over time, to track how school processes are impacting student outcomes and inform policy responses at the population level.

Restacking is continuing to trial and iterate on the indicators to determine which are pragmatic to collect, resonate with communities, and provide robust measures to stimulate community and government action. Research underway with school leaders is identifying the barriers and enablers of collecting and using data to inform practice. Prototypes will then be developed to enable routine collection and use of relevant data.

Recommendation 2.6: That the Panel consider how lead indicators can be incorporated into the measurement framework in the new NSRA

Early years outcomes

SVA has been involved in many discussions in recent years on improving the quality of data on early childhood education and care. This has included working with a number of jurisdictions to explore outcomes-based commissioning approaches for services supporting young children. These approaches require access to high-quality linked data to enable commissioners to understand the outcomes that a particular program or approach may create. As part of this work, we contributed to the

assessment in the *State of Early Learning* report on the key limitations of data in the sector, as shown in Box V below.

Box V: Data challenges and limitations in ECEC in Australia

The *State of Early Learning* report, produced by the Early Learning: Everyone Benefits campaign, found that there are some notable limitations in how the publicly available datasets contribute to our understanding of the state of early learning and the benefits of ECEC in Australia.⁴⁹

The report identifies four categories of limitations: data access; data detail; data linkage; and data gaps.

The report proposed three approaches to better systematic collection and linkage of data:

- *“More robust, comprehensive and longitudinal collection of early learning data to track the experience for the child (not just the services provided), e.g. hours of participation in early learning categorised by type, so the impact of factors such as the delivery setting and staff qualifications can be assessed*
- *More robust, comprehensive and longitudinal collection of early learning data to track outcomes for the child across ECEC and into school. For example: running the AEDC every year, rather than every three years; introducing an AEDC equivalent to assess three year-olds (this could be a combined developmental and health check); and conducting consistent school-entry testing across states that goes beyond the AEDC (e.g. Best Start in NSW), to provide outcomes-based data earlier than Year 3 NAPLAN.*
- *Better and ongoing data linkage and data matching across services (e.g. health, education) to provide a holistic and longitudinal view of children’s needs and level of support provided—especially for those experiencing vulnerability. One-off linkages and population analyses can assist with identifying subgroups that need support, but ‘real time’ linkage is needed to find the individual within a target population and direct them to that support. Data linkage to the services received, both ECEC experience and broader social/health interventions, is also important to ascertain whether those services have improved the outcomes for the child. The recent Taylor Fry report for Their Futures Matter (2018) provides an example of the rich insight that can come from data linkage.”*

There is overlap between the data challenges in the early years sector, and those facing school education, especially in relation to data linkage and data matching across services, so we encourage the Panel to consider what can be learnt from this analysis in a schools context. It would also be valuable to ensure that any changes to data collection, reporting and sharing under the NSRA are done in a way that aligns with the approach taken by the early years sector, as having common approaches will make future data sharing easier, and enable better longitudinal analysis as children move from one system to another.

Recommendation 2.7: That the Panel consider what can be learnt from and aligned with analyses of data limitations and opportunities in the early years sector regarding improving education data in Australia, with a focus on better systematic collection and linkage of data

⁴⁹ Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, [State of early learning in Australia 2019](#), Early Childhood Australia, 2019

2.4. Transparency of and accountability for school funding

Question 36: How can governments make better use of the information already collected and/or published to achieve the objectives?

Question 37: What other funding accountability and transparency information regarding schools (both your school and the education system more generally) would be useful?

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

SVA shares the concerns expressed in the Consultation Paper about the lack of transparency and accountability in school funding in the NSRA. We endorse the proposal in the Paper for establishing mutual obligations for data sharing between jurisdictions in the new NSRA. Such a requirement would both improve funding transparency, and also assist in addressing some of the challenges regarding data collection and sharing that we canvassed in the previous section.

In addition, more rigorous and transparent evaluation is needed of Australian education programs and initiatives to create better transparency and accountability of school funding investments. As Part 1 of this submission outlined, without good evidence of what works that can be understood and shared across the system, we are unlikely to see sustained improvement in outcomes.

Evidence for Learning has sought to contribute to improving evidence generation and evaluation of education programs and initiatives via a pilot program of Randomised Control Trials in Australian school education. The trials were designed around the following principles, which we would recommend governments adopt for future evaluations:

- **Research independence:** Design research and evaluation programs to ensure the delivery of independent, robust and transparent research. Evidence for Learning's *Learning Impact Fund*, for example, paired programs with independently selected and vetted evaluators to conduct rigorous research on the program's impact in schools. Drawing on the Education Endowment Foundation's work, trials follow a set of standards, expectations and guidelines to ensure due diligence at each stage of the evaluation cycle, from evaluators' appointment, to publication of the trial design and protocol, to trial implementation and public reporting. Each trial develops and follows an Evaluation Protocol and undergoes a rigorous peer-review process to ensure fidelity and integrity of both the data and the research process.
- **High-quality research:** High quality research is needed to gather robust evidence of what works and why. To achieve this, all education programs that receive significant government funding should be subject to a quantitative impact evaluation that estimates the effect on students' academic outcomes. Alongside every impact evaluation should be a process evaluation where rigorous qualitative research supports the understanding of quantitative results. The process evaluation also determines program fidelity (i.e. if it was delivered as intended) and importantly, the successful conditions for delivery in schools. Randomised controlled trials are used where possible to reliably compare two interventions to find out what works best.⁵⁰ Early stage program development and pilot evaluation work should be conducted to build the evidence on promising programs before conducting randomised control trials.
- **Communicate evidence:** Robust evaluations of education programs and interventions should be freely and transparently published in the form of a plain English and digestible report for use by educators that will report key conclusions of program effectiveness. The report should articulate the results of both the impact and process evaluation, highlighting three important considerations for successful school-based implementation to help school leaders and teachers make their own

⁵⁰ B Goldacre, [Building evidence into education](#), Department for Education, UK, 2013; L Haynes, O Service, B Goldacre and D Torgerson, [Test, learn, adapt: Developing public policy with randomised controlled trials](#), SSRN Electronic Journal. 10.2139/ssrn.2131581, 2012; J Sharples, [Evidence for the frontline: a report for the Alliance for Useful Evidence](#), Alliance for Useful Evidence, 2012

informed choices with better evidence: average months' worth of learning progress, cost to implement and security of evidence.

The new NSRA should require and/or incentivise system actors to conduct evaluations that align with these principles. In particular, evaluations that have been conducted with funding provided under the NSRA should be required to be made public, regardless of their findings. This will speed up the development of a more robust evidence base, and reduce the effort and resources that other systems and jurisdictions may otherwise invest in approaches that have shown to be ineffective.

Recommendation 2.8: That the Panel consider how the new NSRA can encourage and incentivise the use of rigorous evaluation approaches, and make evaluation findings public to make them useful to a wider range of people and organisations

Appendix A: Research on collaborative networks

As noted in Part 1, there is a growing body of research on the impact of collaboration networks in practice. Some of the key reports and materials (which are also cited where relevant in the main text of the report) include:

- Reports by The Centre for Universal Education at Brookings Institution⁵¹ and The Education Commission⁵² cover research about meso-level networks within systems of education that play an intermediary role between school sites at the micro-level, and government policy at the macro-level. They explore how such networks play a pivotal role in scaling the kind of deep change required to achieve system-wide transformation.
- Education expert Michael Fullan identifies 'social intelligence' as a lever of school system success. Social intelligence refers to collaboration and connected networks of shared and mobilised expertise and knowledge. His recent work discusses approaches to embedding collaboration into the life and culture of schools and systems, with educators supporting each other to tackle the hard work together collaboratively within and beyond the school.⁵³ *The Connection* SVA model is used as an example of such an approach.
- The United Nations Transforming Education summit in 2022 considered two publications on education leadership: *Education reimaged: leadership for a new era*⁵⁴ and *Education reimaged: leadership for transformation: leading into the emerging future*.⁵⁵ These papers argue that new frames and systems of education leadership across the globe are needed to navigate unprecedented challenges. The reports concluded that education leaders need to grow and develop together, to enhance and bolster the collective capacity of the education system and profession to flourish in this time of uncertainty. The reports include a comprehensive series of case studies of collaborative and networked models from across the world, including *The Connection's* work in Australia.
- The opportunity to build effective and functional collaborative system networks where impact can be measured and tracked is based on the principles and evidence of network science. Professor Alan Daly from the University of California has led important work globally in this field for over a decade. His work in education leadership is summarised succinctly in the article *Rethinking Social Networks for Equity, Excellence and Flourishing*.⁵⁶ It provides insights and signposts to support effective network design for impact and how it can be tracked and measured.
- In the Australian context, *The Connection* initiative in collaborative network design was extensively evaluated by the RMIT Policy and Impact team in 2020.⁵⁷ The summary findings paint a clear picture that *The Connection* is an emerging, distinctive, and innovative model of collaboration for professional support across geographies and systems and that participating schools have become sites of innovation and collaboration. The report found that:

The Connection's work in the Australian education system demonstrated that a Collective Leadership Development Network approach is effective in generating meaningful short-term and long-term education outcomes for disadvantaged learners and communities.

Participation in *The Connection* is having a high, if widely varied, impact on the collective capability of both principals and non-principals, on school-based and system-wide improvement practices and student learning in these disadvantaged communities.

⁵¹ D Istance, A Paniagua, R Winthrop and L Ziegler, *Learning to leapfrog: innovative pedagogies to transform education: summary findings: policy brief*, Center for Universal Education at Brookings, 2019

⁵² Education Commission, *Transforming the education workforce: learning teams for a learning generation*, Education Commission, 2020

⁵³ M Fullan, *The right drivers for whole systems success*, CSE Leading Education Series, Centre for Strategic Education, 2021

⁵⁴ CSE, *Education reimaged: leadership for a new era*, CSE, 2022

⁵⁵ CSE, *Education Reimagined: Leadership for Transformation: Leading into the Emerging Future*, CSE, 2022;

⁵⁶ A Daly and J Brooks, *Rethinking social networks for equity, excellence and flourishing*, SVA Quarterly, 24 March 2022.

⁵⁷ Singhania et al., *Unleashing the power of the collective in education: the impact evaluation of SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection*



Findings reveal participants – including principals and non-principals — consistently report improvement in their knowledge and mindsets and frequently report that their motivation to share and contribute to outcomes and collaboration beyond their own school has increased.

School sites across all three participating states evaluated had implemented a wide range of improvement practices.