



REDI
RESEARCH FOR
EDUCATIONAL IMPACT



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

The Centre for Research for Educational Impact,
Deakin University

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

This submission is prepared by members of the Centre for Research for Educational Impact (REDI) at Deakin University. REDI is a Strategic Research and Innovation Centre that is funded by Deakin University and external research income generated through Australian Research Council Funding, tendered external research contracts and philanthropic donors.

Statement of the vision

Our vision is to identify and address critical issues and pivotal turning points in education in a digital, post-covid world. We are committed to educational research that is socially engaged and creates the greatest impact for just and sustainable societies. We are a world-leading interdisciplinary research centre that aims to understand the complex ways in which education impacts lives from early childhood to adulthood.

Statement of the purpose

Our researchers are an outstanding team of Australian internationally renowned academics spanning diverse, yet complimentary, disciplines in the field of education. We work with international and national partners and stakeholders to impact policy and practice, and for transforming education systems, governments and educational organisations, and communities. This significant and impactful work is underpinned by global research collaboration across **four distinctive interdisciplinary themes** to identify and address critical educational issues that lead to just and sustainable societies for the future. We foster the next generation of leaders in the field of education to ensure the social contract for education remains relevant and aligns with and creates social change.

REDI's four interdisciplinary themes are as follows:



Diversity and Social Justice in Education



Education, Governance and Policy for Sustainable Societies



Learners in a Digital World



STEM Education for Sustainable Futures

Focus of submission

The recommendations in our response are focused on a seismic shift in policy reform for Australian Education. A national focus on the fundamentals of systemic and equitable school resourcing is required to counter past policy reforms, targets and measures that have been directed to individual student under-achievement. Such a shift in focus would align with over a century of impactful educational reforms and practices too often overlooked in the current policy discourse.

Attainment of school students across Australia

After more than a decade of reforms and targets based upon student and school level achievement indicators, there has been little to no improvement in attainment of school students across Australia. In its own terms, many of these policies could only be considered 'successful' since the policies themselves have not been subject to the level of accountability they have subjected school systems to. The failure of many of these policies is due to these reforms, targets and measures being focused upon the effects or results of policy settings, rather than upon the causes of student under-achievement.

Policies and measures that would be more likely to drive sustainable improvements in student outcomes would include upstream causal factors addressing the conditions of student learning that directly impinge on their ability to benefit within the classroom. The types of systemic and school-based measures that impact on students are school context, relations of schools with families and the teacher workforce. This means that better measures would include those of poverty or when did the student eat their last meal. What proportion of classrooms are adequately resourced to enable comfortable and competent instruction? What proportion of students requiring additional support have access to qualified staff? What does the school do to involve parents in their children's education particularly the parents of students most in need of complex, wrap around support and how are these parents encouraged to bring their cultural knowledge into the classroom? What proportion of teachers in the school are teaching out of their field of expertise? What support is provided to teachers teaching subjects they have not been trained in? What proportion of out of field teachers are in their first years of teaching? What proportion of students entering school have had access to quality early childhood education, particularly by the ICSEA of the school? Do students feel they belong and are cared for in their classroom and school? Do they see teachers in the classroom who look like themselves?

To ask such questions is to shift our focus from what is wrong with teachers and their students towards asking what systemic failures face too many schools, in the hope that in asking these questions attention will be redirected towards what can be fixed that will make real improvements.

The **Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System** consultation paper makes it clear that the school sectors that have the most students with the highest needs continue to receive the lowest levels of funding. The needs of students and young people who have experienced trauma (including those of refugee background) and who have had limited or no access to schooling prior to arriving in Australia need to be taken into consideration, with funding being directed towards helping them to meet their highly specialised needs. This should become a guiding principle across the Australian education system.

Health and wellbeing of students

We appreciate the efforts and attention being drawn to the mental health and wellbeing of our students. Nonetheless, we fear the current recommendations reflect the same pitfalls consistently encountered with prior wellbeing promotion efforts. To fundamentally improve the mental health and wellbeing of our students we must target the components leading to their decline; components that persist outside school office hours.

Positive Psychology's fundamental approach seeks to establish structures that promote wellbeing and prevent or minimise adverse events. The consultation paper identifies wellbeing as an ecological model "influenced by various risk and protective factors within the child's environment", yet the environment continues to be considered superficially, if at all. The Australian nation is facing a cost-of-living crisis, with homelessness continuing to rise. Prior to considering the emotional and social wellbeing of our students, we must ensure their basic physiological needs (e.g., food, shelter) are met.

Schools play a vital role in supporting wellbeing – in many instances it is the only place where a student may feel secure to seek support – yet schools are not structurally designed to provide support for students in a way society increasingly requires. Such wrap-around support needs to be provided at a community level, as it is beyond the scope of schools to provide on their own.

Using NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) assessments as a mechanism for collecting wellbeing information will not provide an accurate representation of student mental health and wellbeing. This is because the students most in need are far less likely to complete these assessments or to be engaged enough to critically reflect on the posed questions. Such a metric will inevitably miss those most in need of support and advocacy. Assessment of student needs must be conducted via multiple stakeholders – including their teachers and school staff directly familiar with the circumstances and characteristics of these children – in a manner that is neither intrusive nor capable of bias. Wellbeing assessment is not as clear cut as standard competency determination, as it inevitably includes many factors, and conflicts of interests, that hinder objective understanding.

Recommendation: Preventative measures must be provided at the school and community level providing funding and joined up services according to the wellbeing needs of their students.

Recommendation: Funding should be directly targeted to equity groups and schools most in need. Schools and school systems must be made accountable for the expenditure of funds.

The best teachers for those with the greatest need

Teachers who themselves have experienced the impact of barriers to their own higher education are vital to ensuring the teaching workforce is diverse and responsive to the needs of all students. Location is critical to both access and retention in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). For students from rural and regional backgrounds, going to university is costly and requires many to work for the full 20 hours a week which impacts on their studies. Additionally, they experience loneliness and a sense of isolation and have difficulty finding accommodation if they are not on campus and have support in accessing campus facilities. They therefore are often the group most likely to exit in their first year.

For all tertiary students, but particularly those without financial support, practicums require them to lose income. Most students now work maximum hours and this impacts on their study, health and wellbeing. Students from low SES (socioeconomic status) backgrounds lack the financial support needed when faced with a crisis.

The intersectionality of student need is critical, for example, as First Nations students experience financial issues, difficulty in getting work, cultural issues related to different knowledge practices, responsibility to family, and experience racism. It must be recognised that these difficulties are not additive but grow exponentially for those faced with multiple disadvantages.

Recommendation: Additional funds for accommodation for rural and regional students/ students from low SES backgrounds.

Recommendation: Free university places for all First Nation students who meet the selection criteria (Accord Interim Report).

How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers

We have known for decades that teachers are most likely to enter the profession because they wish to make a real difference to the lives of their students. They remain in the profession when they feel they are treated as professionals with expert knowledge and skills and in developing their professional capabilities and identities as teachers among similarly highly skilled and focused professionals. When teachers believe they can make a difference to the lives of their students, while concurrently developing their professional capabilities, they are likely to remain in the profession even when they remain employed within the kinds of toxic work environments too many Australian schools have become in recent years through systemic neglect.

Young people increasingly do not believe that were they to become teachers they would be able to make a difference to the lives of their students, nor that they would be able to develop as professional and impactful teachers. Until this perception is reversed, it is not clear how the profession will attract more teachers. This perception will not change under current policy settings, which are designed to de-professionalise teaching, create an environment of distrust via a regime of high stakes assessment, undermine teacher autonomy through increasingly mandated pedagogical practices and curriculum standards, all while seeking to provide 'teacher proof' instructional materials supposedly of universal applicability. The current obsession with high impact teaching strategies makes education only suitable for students who do not experience multiple forms of disadvantage. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' strategy, other than developing professional teachers attuned to the deeply contextual needs of their students.

To achieve this, teachers need to have spent time in schools to understand the significant needs of their students. School systems should measure the length of tenure of teachers according to the ICSEA of schools. Improvements in teacher retention in the 'hardest to staff schools' should be a critical measure of systemic success as an improvement in this measure would provide undoubted benefits to students, particularly those in the most grossly disadvantaged school locations. If teachers are considered the greatest 'in class' factor for improving student attainment and teaching is a deeply relational profession, then encouraging the system to be measured against its ability to retain teachers in the most disadvantaged schools is a clear, evidence-based measure likely to have high impact.

Recommendation: Funding to be distributed to support teacher learning which recognises and enhance professional expertise at all career stages.

Recommendation: Principals need training and support to meet workforce needs, particularly staffing in the context of hard to staff schools.

Recommendation: More needs to be done to encourage the retention of teachers in hard to staff schools.

Teaching as relational and contextual

Teaching is a deeply relational and contextual practice and therefore universally applicable teaching strategies derived from statistical averages of meta-analyses are of more limited efficacy than is assumed. Developing teacher professional capabilities, teacher networks and communities of practice focused upon the inherent complexity of their teaching and learning situation, so they can approach education as 'teacher researchers' would show that the system values the real impactful work of the profession. Too many proposed reforms (such as, providing teachers with oven-ready lesson plans) effectively de-professionalise teaching, and thereby takes away a key element of what draws people into the profession in the first place.

Teachers often leave the profession because they have found that after a significant period, they remain unable to achieve permanency. Long term casual and temporary employment has multiple negative impacts beyond the feelings of precarity experienced by the teachers themselves. Casual teachers often have limited or no access to professional learning at a point in their career when this would otherwise be most impactful. These teachers often feel they are 'child minding' rather than having control in proper, professional classroom roles. As such, they develop 'defensive pedagogies' at a point in their careers when they ought to be experimenting with student engagement based upon a deepening knowledge of their students as the best means of improving classroom discipline. This means they find it impossible to learn the deeply relational aspects of teaching, something repeatedly found to mediate the transition from novice to expert teacher, since their short-term contracts never allow them to 'get to know' their students.

Recommendation: Systems need to take more responsibility in ensuring that the teacher workforce is provided with secure, ongoing employment and that these systems must contribute state and federal government funds agreed to under the Gonski Report.

The failure of school reform in Australia

Virtually all 'reforms' over the past decade have had the consequence of ensuring the exact opposite outcome to that needed to increase the diversity of the teacher workforce. LANTITE makes access to the profession disproportionately more difficult for EADL background teachers. This is despite it being clear that teachers who are more like their students have a clear positive impact in student attainment. The obsession with providing subsidised (or even highly rewarded) pathways for 'high achieving students' into teaching, even when knowing these students may only stay within the profession for a couple of years, creates a perception that mainstream teachers following the normal pathway into the profession (that is, the overwhelming majority of preservice teachers) are second-best or worse. Such insults to the professional capacity of these preservice and early career teachers do not go unnoticed. If half of the support that is offered to 'nice middle-class' students was instead provided to attracting and retaining teachers more like the students they will teach, that is, teachers who are also more likely to stay within the profession beyond a two-year sojourn, perhaps diversity would become less of an issue.

Recommendation: Better resourcing for teacher education research into in-school and professional learning experiences that encourage teacher retention, and the role ITE (Initial Teacher Education) courses could play in graduate professional learning in their first years in schools, particularly in facilitating communities of practice and teacher action research capabilities.

Recommendation: Reverse policies that effectively exclude a diverse range of teachers from the profession.

How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

There is a lack of data about cultural diversity of the teacher workforce and whether it represents the student populations they teach. If we are to gather data on the number of students from English as an Additional Language background, this ought to be done in a way that ensures this data is disaggregated by ethnicity, length of time in Australia, language background and other indicators linked to disadvantage, such as refugee status. It is pointless to assume that EADL students form a single cohort.

Regardless of transparency and accountability, Australia has chosen to persist with a grossly inequitable funding system that actively disadvantages the most vulnerable, disadvantaged students in need of assistance, while providing an over-abundance of resources to those already advantaged in the non-government sector. Australia is unique among Western nations in funding schools regardless of level of fee income these schools can charge. We have ignored the cumulative impacts of inequity that divert attention away from systematic inequality while attributing blame to easier targets: teachers in classrooms or initial teacher education. This is ironic as all teachers in Australia across all sectors are educated by the same ITE providers. ITE is not the reason for unequal student outcomes, but an improved discourse in the media and by policymakers about teachers, ongoing, well-funded professional learning and good teaching work conditions are more likely to make teaching more attractive.

Evidence clearly shows that teachers are neither attracted into or are leaving the profession because the job is no longer possible to perform and morale is low due to casualisation, overwork, too much administration, increasing accountability and reduced professional autonomy. Student and parental violence are also increasing—all with health and wellbeing effects. This situation for teachers is worst where there is a crowding of disadvantage into underfunded public schools. This inevitably leads to worsening student attainment across the entire educational system in which parents with the financial capacity bypass schools without a quality-built environment and a stable teacher workforce. The concentration of multiple forms of disadvantage coupled with a reduced rung of academic ability among peer groups impacts student achievement. The social and academic mix of peers is a key factor in improvement for lower academic achievers but has little to no effect on high academic achievers. As such, government policies directed at encouraging parents to remove high achieving students from public schools have multiplied the disadvantages felt in these schools, while doing next to nothing to improve the outcomes of the students removed. Any efforts made to reduce systemic differences are likely to result in major benefits in terms of attainment, student wellbeing, international test performance and teacher satisfaction and retention.

The publication of funding data should not be limited to that provided by state and federal governments or parental contributions in terms of fees but include funding from all sources – including that raised by the school communities more generally and received from philanthropic organisations. This, together with the special benefits non-government schools have due to their charity status in which they do not pay rates, payroll tax or land tax, to the detriment of local ratepayers also needs to be accounted and reported in school funding data. The sharing of facilities which are partially funded by state and federal governments should therefore be considered as part of social responsibility to community.

We are particularly concerned that up-to-date and relevant educational research is generally ignored by policy makers and systems. The impact of education industry is equivalent to, if not more significant, than most other industries in terms of its

economic, cultural, and social benefits, however, it never receives the same levels of funding that other industries do either through national schemes or philanthropic donors.

Recommendation: There is a need for improved data collection by universities, departments of education, and AITSL of teacher workforce with regard to diversity of the teacher workforce in order to inform equity policy and to hold systems accountable for expenditure.

Recommendation: A central plank of any policy seeking to improve student outcomes must focus upon the debilitating and pernicious effects of increasing systemic inequalities across the system and reducing the effects of some schools being able to offer hugely well-funded schools at public expense.

Recommendation: Publish individual school funding according to their marginal seat status as this is a potential means of improving transparency and accountability.

Recommendation: Low ICSEA schools should receive special funding to compensate for them being used as test sites for poorly considered, experimental programs of dubious impact and of limited research evidential support, such as Teach for Australia. TFA costs governments significantly and yet more than half of TFA graduates exit the profession shortly after graduating.

Recommendation: Level the playing field nationally for targeted research funding.

Relevant Deakin University educational research

Websites:

Educator Health and Wellbeing <https://www.educatorhealth.org/>

Research for Educational Impact: <https://redi.deakin.edu.au/>

School Autonomy and social Justice in Australian Public Education <https://www.schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org/>

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