



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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### Summary

The indivisible link between quality and equity in schooling is recognised in the Australian Education Act.

Quality education for all students requires a focus on the distinctive purposes of schooling – developing students’ intellectual capacities. There is a need to avoid:

- Overburdening schools and teachers to the point of role confusion and diffusion.
- Stratification of students according to false dichotomies between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ learning.

The most important form of equality is students’ equality of access to the quantity and quality of teaching they require to do their personal best.

Needs-based funding provides a foundation for maximising equality of educational opportunity. Governments now need to make quality teaching the centrepiece of their schools funding, through tying it more explicitly to teaching, including through:

- Funding all teachers at the equivalent of the top of the relevant salary range; linked with planned professional development towards standards set out by AITSL
- Establishing a national rural teaching service, with conditions conducive to recruiting, training and developing teachers with the necessary skills and commitment, and providing a range of incentives for them to stay long enough in remote and rural areas to bring about real improvement in student outcomes.

Priority for quality teaching requires action to protect the integrity of recurrent funding provided by governments for schools. Funding provided for recurrent purposes should not be undermined by the use of funding for capital works. Public

funding should not be used, directly or indirectly, to build up private school buildings and facilities to a standard beyond what is educationally justifiable. This will require:

- Establishing reasonable capital standards for schools
- Introducing a capital allowance for private schools so that any amount invested over and above these standards will be deducted from the schools' entitlement to recurrent funding from government.

## Main submission

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

Evidence of the increasing socio-economic stratification of Australia's school system has been accompanied by evidence, both national and international, of increased difficulty in achieving educational success for students and schools across the board and, in particular, for those students most vulnerable due to circumstances beyond their control.

This suggests, as recognised in the current Australian Education Act, that there is an indivisible link between the quality and equity of our school system, in terms of student access, participation and achievement.

It is to be expected that differences among students' abilities, interests and the effort they invest in learning will be reflected in the outcomes of schooling. These outcomes can be maximised through education policies as well as a range of social policies that affect the health and general well-being of children.

What is not justifiable are the differences in access, participation and rate of progress in learning and outcomes that arise from circumstances such as where students live; the income of their families; the schools they attend (or their geographical location); gender differences or cultural background.

What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

Schooling has special and distinctive purposes in a democratic society. Distinguished American educator, Jerome Bruner (1994), defined the role of teachers as 'empowering human intelligence and human sensibility for life in an open society'.

The above question needs, in our view, to be refined if it is to yield a meaningful answer to guide policy in an age when the range of capabilities, skills and knowledge students could learn at school to prepare them for the future is growing exponentially; and where there is a need to avoid overburdening schools and teachers to the point of role confusion and diffusion where they become less effectual.

“Which of the many worthwhile capabilities, skills and knowledge that students could learn should be the particular business of the school?”

This question will focus debate on the distinctive and essential purpose of schooling, which is to cultivate the intellectual potential of children and young people.

The Issues paper acknowledges that ‘Learning doesn’t just happen at school’ and that families, communities and other agencies and organisations can and should work with schools and are also sources of learning for children and young people in their own right. But this does not lessen the need to recognise the distinctive role of schooling as the formal process by which we foster the intellectual development of our children and young people to enable them to think for themselves and to make rational and informed decisions. Schools exist to pass on to each generation our society’s best validated understandings and ways of thinking about the world, about how things came to be the way they are and about what options there are to achieve sustainability and social advancement.

Schools should focus on students’ learning those capabilities, skills and knowledge that have social, cultural and economic significance in our society; and especially on those which most young people are unlikely to acquire elsewhere. Students learn best in schools where they feel safe and secure; and where they have both a sense of belonging and of freedom to express their own identities.

The challenges of the contemporary world mean that all students should have the opportunity to develop their capacity to the full to understand the nature of the key disciplines across the sciences and humanities. This opportunity should not be confined to those who will go on to higher education; it is a necessary condition for full participation and citizenship in democratic decision-making.

In preparing students for the future, the curriculum should not be based on an outmoded separation between abstract and critical thinking and applied knowledge; or between academic and vocational learning. At the same time, schools have a responsibility to prepare all students for working life, for full economic participation in society and for contributing to the nation’s capacity to earn its living in a competitive global economy.

There is a need, in particular, to avoid a situation in which a so-called ‘academic curriculum’ becomes the preserve largely of students from advantaged homes and communities attending well-resourced and variously selective schools; while their less advantaged peers are provided with forms of so-called ‘vocational education’ many of which do not guarantee a transition to employment.

Decisions about what students should learn will require a formal process among all Australian governments for setting broad and clear goals that are capable of being translated into priorities for the ongoing improvement of the delivery of schooling generally and, in particular, of curriculum and teaching practice.

The discussion paper states that decisions have been made by the Commonwealth about its own funding commitments to schools and that the task now is to focus on the most effective and efficient use of that funding to achieve agreed outcomes. Decisions about funding and educational outcomes cannot, however, be considered in isolation. Governments have a clear responsibility to set goals and priorities that are able to be achieved by all schools for their students with the resources available to them.

Students and families, as well as teachers, are entitled to have confidence that what schools are offering can be delivered effectively. What needs to be avoided is the kind of overly broad curriculum that is unable to be delivered in many schools and for many students because of the lack of resources available, in terms of time and of the intensity and depth of teaching expertise available.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

The power to improve student outcomes over time lies primarily with teachers, working with students in their classrooms. Teachers and their students need to be able to engage with each other in a sustained and meaningful way for the latter to learn most effectively.

Students' are entitled to equal access to the quantity and quality of teaching they require to do their personal best. This is the most important form of equity that schooling can provide.

The primary purpose of the recurrent funding governments provide is to guarantee equal access by all students in all schools to the quantity and quality of teaching this funding provides.

In practical terms, it is difficult to provide all schools with the mix of teachers according to qualifications and experience that provides optimal learning support for the particular students they enrol. In more advantaged schools, students enjoy opportunities for greater time on task with teachers, including those with relevant experience, qualifications and expertise, than in schools facing a more challenging workload.

In the context of the Australian Education Act, the SRS provides the basis for the development, over time, of a measure of the real and substantive teaching resources needed by schools, having regard to each school's circumstances and the educational needs of the students it enrolls.

Governments, state and Commonwealth, now need a more explicit, agreed commitment to making quality teaching the centrepiece of their funding to schools; to making a more equitable investment in teaching across all schools; and to tying recurrent funding directly to teaching.

In order to support ongoing improvement, there is a need to integrate the supply of schools leaders and teachers with the relevant standards framework.

Professional learning frameworks are now in place through the work of AITSL. But these now need to be accompanied by allocating funding to schools to provide the necessary time for - and access to - professional learning, both individual and collaborative, as well as research - across all stages of a teaching career. Without a clearer focus on providing a supportive environment for ongoing professional advancement by teachers in all schools, there is a very real risk that accreditation and teaching standards will simply provide the occasion for increased inequities among schools.

There is a strong case for providing schools with the equivalent of the maximum relevant salary range from classroom teacher through to school leader. This would mean, for example, that schools with beginning teachers (on minimum salaries) received funding for additional hours of teaching time, to enable a planned program of professional learning for those beginning teachers, including an initially lighter teaching load.

A more systemic approach to resourcing schools to provide a supportive professional environment will enable beginning teachers to work effectively in their classrooms and to gain the professional competence and confidence to advance in their chosen profession at all stages of their careers; and thus reduce teacher loss, undue turnover and burnout.

The fact that the costs of the total teaching force in Australia are now being met from the public purse across both the public and private schools sectors make it the more critical that this huge public investment be the driver of ongoing improvement in student achievement and school performance across the system as a whole.

Consistent with the need to guarantee equal access by all students in all schools to the quantity and quality of teaching, and to overcome the unacceptable gap between student achievement in remote and rural areas and their urban counterparts, governments should give consideration to the establishment of a national rural teaching service. The objective of such a service would be to recruit, train and develop teachers with the necessary skills and commitment, and to provide a range of incentives for them to stay long enough in remote and rural areas to bring about real improvement in student outcomes.

In the interests of accountability for the distribution of teachers and resources for teaching, an independent public report should be prepared annually by the most appropriate national agency to collect comprehensive information on the allocation of teachers across all schools. This will enable analysis of and public reporting on the distribution of investment in teachers and the extent to which all students are

receiving their fair share of effective teaching, based on teacher numbers, qualifications, experience, access to and participation in professional learning etc.

There is a need to preserve the integrity and intent of public funding provided for recurrent purposes, such as through the Schooling Resources Standard; and to ensure that this recurrent funding is applied strictly for those purposes and with the objective of making teaching the centrepiece of schools funding.

In both sectors, public and private, the diversion of public recurrent funding for capital purposes undermines the achievement the recurrent resources standard (SRS) in all schools. Public recurrent funding should not be used, directly or indirectly, to build up private school buildings and facilities to a standard beyond the level that can be justified on purely educational grounds. To this end, governments should specify reasonable capital standards as the basis for re-introducing a capital allowance for private schools such that any funding invested by the school over and above these standards will be deducted from those schools' entitlement to recurrent funding from government.

Ongoing improvement in educational achievement requires support from government for engagement between teachers and learners in classrooms and schools. This also requires action beyond the school to support families and communities in sending children to school as prepared as possible for effective learning; and then to provide support for conditions in school in which learners can flourish.

There is a need at all stages of schooling for teachers to intervene in a timely way to prevent cumulative learning deficits. In particular, there is a need for greater emphasis on intensity of teaching needed by students in the early years of their schooling to establish confidence in learning. Students who become fluent readers in their early years are the most likely to complete schooling successfully. Governments need to invest in early childhood care and education, on both educational and economic grounds.

How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

The 'system enablers' described here can only be justified if they combine to enable effective teaching in schools. National curriculum and teaching standards have the potential to make explicit community and professional expectations, but can only lead to improvement when they make sense to teachers and school leaders. Targets, standards and the like remain empty rhetoric unless schools and teachers have the support they need to achieve them in practice. Practising teachers and school

leaders need to be directly involved in the ongoing development of curriculum and teaching standards if they are to be meaningful.

Information on student progress and achievement is needed by parents if they are to have confidence in their children's schooling. Teachers need a range of assessment tools in order to monitor their students' progress; and to access professional learning. School leaders need evidence to monitor and support the work of teachers.

School authorities need data on school and student performance to monitor quality and equity and to determine priorities for policy research and development.

Governments, state and Commonwealth, need information as a basis for accounting to the electorate for its investment in schooling.

There is a need to achieve a comprehensive and coordinated approach, to bring together the existing array of 'system enablers' from the perspective of teachers, parents, school leaders, school authorities and governments. A precondition for this is a clear and public rationale that sets out who needs what information on schools and student achievement, and for what purpose; and the safeguards for the use of that data.

A comprehensive and coordinated range of means for gathering quantitative and qualitative evidence is needed including, for example, evaluation, testing, surveys, longitudinal studies, statistical presentations, and sampling of students' work. In doing so, priority should be given to avoiding unnecessary diversion of time and effort from teaching and learning in schools.