



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

Submitter: NT Government
Submitting as a: Government agency
State: NT

Summary

The focus should shift nationally from student achievement to student growth and progress where a national definition of a years' worth of growth could support schools and systems achieve benchmarks that are relevant to each student, in addition to national achievement scores.

- The use of a national Year 1 assessment for phonics and numeracy has the potential to duplicate existing assessment processes and further alienate Aboriginal learners whose first language is the local vernacular. Rather than an additional assessment, a sustained effort to build the capability of teachers to implement explicit, systemic and sequential phonics programs could improve phonics and numeracy levels in Year 1 students.
- The NT supports the work underway nationally around initial teacher education reforms, a review of teacher registration and accreditation, and continued development of a collective data system to improve the quality of the teaching workforce.
- Student engagement should be acknowledged as a precursor to student attendance, particularly in remote and very remote communities, where a strong focus is needed on building community relationships to reduce barriers and promote strong patterns of attendance.
- Nationally consistent school improvement standards could be co-developed to include consistent measures of growth and progress at the school level.
- Develop an overarching national data strategy to inform systemic practice capturing growth and progress in the areas identified as part of the national reform plan, and provide an evidence base to implement national school improvement standards.
- The NT recognises early childhood education as critical to successful student learning as well as improving health and well-being outcomes for children.

Fragmented and short term funding agreements undermine our intent to ensure NT children have access to a quality early childhood education and our ability to sustain a quality workforce.

Main submission

Introduction

The Northern Territory Department of Education welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Panel for the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (the Review). This submission outlines strategic reform initiatives currently underway in the Northern Territory (NT) and highlights alignment opportunities with national reforms. To ensure school education reforms are nationally agreed and achievable, the NT Department of Education (the department) submits that continued collaboration and consultation between jurisdictions is essential, and that a national reform agenda must be embedded with enough flexibility and autonomy to permit implementation in each jurisdiction with consideration of local context.

NT Context

The department provides education services to more than 34 000 children and students in 153 government schools, from early years to adulthood and regulates 37 non-government schools servicing more than 11 800 students. Proportionally, the NT has almost double the school age population in the lowest socio-economic group compared to the Australian average. Six in 10 NT schools have an ICSEA score below 900, compared to approximately 1 in 10 schools nationally. Two in five students in the NT are Aboriginal, compared to one in 20 nationally, and one in four are very remote Aboriginal students compared to 1 in 250 nationally. These factors provide a profile of students significantly different from other Australian student cohorts. Furthermore, educational achievements of NT students are influenced to a much higher degree than the other parts of Australia by geographical isolation, social and economic disadvantage, mobility, parents with low educational levels and workforce participation, poor health and nutrition, inadequate housing conditions, and domestic and family violence.

The Territory welcomes a national drive to lift student outcomes and Australia's performance in light of recent international assessments, and recognises that targets, trajectories and performance measures must be tailored to each jurisdiction's context and starting points.

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

Educational success looks different for every student and for every school. Extensive evidence identifies that the diversity of needs amongst students and schools must be

accommodated by education systems, and this message has been relayed to the department through recent consultations undertaken to inform a new strategic direction focused on school improvement.

For schools, the new strategic focus provides for the planned and targeted allocation of resources as they embed their individual improvement agenda. It means making an assessment of the stage that a school is at in its improvement journey and scaffolding its continued growth through a range of support systems and interventions.

For students, it means investing in strategies that drive teaching quality so that each students' needs are met with differentiated and personalised teaching and learning approaches, so that every child and student has an opportunity to engage, grow and achieve.

Systems must be able to help students achieve educational success by providing flexible learning pathways that recognise differing student needs to engage in learning. Pathways need to adequately prepare them for a changing world and ensure a range of options are available when leaving school. All students need to be enabled to complete their education with the skills they need to engage in meaningful work that contributes to each jurisdiction's economic needs, recognising that these skills may not form part of a formal qualification or standard.

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

The department delivers educational programs and initiatives aimed at having a positive impact on students and their futures. Under our renewed vision, we will remain focused on equipping students with the skills and knowledge they need to live and work successfully in the 21st century, including General Capabilities and increasing student engagement in science, technology, engineering and mathematics learning.

We will maintain our investment in what we know makes a difference, such as early years, literacy and numeracy programs, supporting children with additional needs, promoting student wellbeing and providing access to senior secondary schooling options.

We will continue to lead the provision of languages and cultures education in recognition of the continuing use of Indigenous languages and their value and contribution to the social and economic fabric of the Territory.

As a system, we will focus on the body of evidence that validates our current activity, and build on this with initiatives that assist in meeting the NT Government's objective of striving for quality outcomes for all Territorians.

b. How should school quality and educational success be measured?

A significant cohort of NT students consistently achieve below national minimum standards, with National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy data reflecting the low base from which students commence their education when compared with their peers from other jurisdictions.

The department has found that the exclusive use of attendance and NAPLAN data to measure educational success results in a narrow view of student attainment, particularly in remote and very remote communities, and this is becoming evident in contemporary research. Professor John Hattie discusses the concept of what a year's growth looks like and how this may differ depending on where each student starts (Hattie, 2015, p.16) noting 'the need to reframe the narrative away from standards and achievement and move it towards progression...there are many other critical outcomes besides the usual academic measures' (Hattie, 2015, p.5).

In acknowledgement of this finding, the department is focussing on measuring student growth as an indicator of progress and success as an addition to NAPLAN data. This will allow teachers and schools to track student progress over time in each curriculum area, observing and monitoring growth and isolating areas for targeted teaching and support.

If success could be measured through growth and progress rather than academic achievement of standards alone, with strong data to evidence this, more informed and targeted decisions could be made about individual performance and the specific needs of students, schools and communities. Learning growth measures will provide evidence of the effectiveness of programs, support and drive the school improvement agenda and provide meaningful information to parents and policy makers.

To inform teacher practice, the NT has invested significantly beyond NAPLAN in sourcing and developing tools that measure student growth and achievement through testing in numeracy, reading, writing, and phonological awareness. This provides educators and the system with a more accurate reflection of individual achievement and an opportunity to more regularly review individual student growth.

The Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) for both Reading (R) and Numeracy (N) are being implemented from year 1 to 10 in NT Government schools. The tests aim to provide objective and standardised information to teachers about student skills and understanding in reading comprehension and mathematics, identifying an individual student's current strengths and weaknesses. A Territory-wide collection of this data allows student growth in reading and mathematics to be measured at a student, class, school and system level and helps focus effort where it is needed most.

The NT recognises that students whose first language is not English must be provided with explicit teaching of English from the start of school. It has developed two programs that meet these needs, and each of these have the capacity to provide

student growth data: Literacy and Numeracy Essentials for students from F-6, and Foundations of Early Literacy Assessment focusing on phonological and phonemic awareness.

Key point: The focus should shift nationally from student achievement to student growth and progress where a national definition of a years' worth of growth could support schools and systems achieve benchmarks that are relevant to each student, in addition to national achievement scores.

Key point: The use of a national Year 1 assessment for phonics and numeracy has the potential to duplicate existing assessment processes and further alienate Aboriginal learners whose first language is the local vernacular. Rather than an additional assessment, a sustained effort to build the capability of teachers to implement explicit, systemic and sequential phonics programs could improve phonics and numeracy levels in Year 1 students.

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

It is critical that national reforms do not impose priorities on states and territories or demand a diffusion of effort. Making gains against multiple measures at once creates an environment of limited success and high pressure, and this has been the experience of the department over a number of years. Reflecting on its historical efforts in implementing a number of simultaneous priorities has led the department to the decision to drive a sharp and narrow focus in pursuing student, school and system improvements. Key focus areas will frame the department's collaborative strategic work and will be drawn from contemporary evidence of what works in education settings, and what is working in education systems across Australia. Specific focus is expected to be given to areas encompassing:

1. Quality teaching
2. Community engagement
3. School leadership
4. Differentiated support for schools, and
5. Data and accountability.
 - a. Teaching quality and school leadership

Expert teachers and effective school leadership must necessarily be central to any plan to drive system and school improvement. Evidence is unequivocal in illustrating that quality of teachers is the key influence in lifting student outcomes, and educational leadership is critical in equipping staff to focus on student learning outcomes. A strong focus on these two factors will assist in raising the overall quality of the Australian education system.

The department recognises the need to strengthen the capacity of classroom teachers and trainers to provide the highest quality teaching, learning and training programs. It supports continued reforms to develop national approaches to lift tertiary entry levels, reduce the number and improve consistency of teaching courses offered by universities and enforce high standards for entry and delivery of higher education courses.

It also acknowledges the potential benefits of establishing pathways for students as they transition from school to the workforce so that some of our best and most capable students become our best and most capable staff members.

The department is delivering several initiatives to address continued improvements in teacher induction processes, mentoring and workforce and career development for existing teachers. In remote and very remote communities where teacher turnover is high, a more targeted approach could be adopted nationally to providing teaching and development pathways for local Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal students transitioning from school. Coaching and mentoring will be a continuing focus locally and could complement the existing suite of national reforms to build teacher capabilities. Teachers in the NT who are undertaking the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALT) program as drivers of improvement in teacher quality could receive national accreditation to accelerate their growth and capabilities.

Key point: The NT supports the work underway nationally around initial teacher education reforms, a review of teacher registration and accreditation, and continued development of a collective data system to improve the quality of the teaching workforce.

b. Community engagement

The Commonwealth and the Territory governments have focused on school attendance initiatives (such as the Remote School Attendance Strategy) for students in remote and very remote communities with only pockets of success. Attendance initiatives largely rely on attendance data at a systemic level and are addressed with top level responses. A strong message from schools and communities during the department's consultations was that student engagement is a precursor to attendance at school. Supporting this is a range of research which references the positive impact on student achievement where schools are able to build trusting collaborative relationships between teachers, families and community members.

Under the broader NT Government priority of increasing local decision-making around government service delivery to local Aboriginal people and organisations, the department is developing a community engagement and decision making framework. This framework includes the community-led schools model in selected communities, to strengthen partnerships with families, communities, schools and

government agencies. Sustained success relies on stakeholder input and ownership of decisions made to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal children. The department will work with government schools to build school governance capacity and empower communities to make decisions about education and training with a strong focus on continuous improvement in student attendance, engagement, and literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Key point: Student engagement should be acknowledged as a precursor to student attendance, particularly in remote and very remote communities, where a strong focus is needed on building community relationships to reduce barriers and promote strong patterns of attendance.

c. Differentiated levels of support for schools

During the department's recent consultations, stakeholders emphasised the need for targeted support for schools, particularly small remote schools, as they accommodate the complex needs of their student cohort and manage effective collaborations and engagement with their communities.

The department recognises that this support should be provided through a model of differentiation applied to individual schools. Based on contemporary research into school and system improvement, particularly by McKinsey and Company, this would ensure that targeted resources were available to schools at different stages of the improvement continuum who require different types and levels of systemic support.

Similar to the approach taken to regulate and improve early childhood service delivery, national school improvement standards could be adopted to drive continuous improvement and consistency in education service delivery in primary and secondary years. A set of resources for use by systems and schools providing evidence based approaches to school and system improvement could be developed. Creating measures and standards for schools requires acknowledgment of student starting points, engagement, growth and achievement levels.

The importance of jurisdictional autonomy in implementing the standards is emphasised, given the vast differences in schools' starting points. Determining what successful schools look like, and developing tools and resources to assist state and territory departments achieve success, would better support state and territory governments and promote collaborative working.

Key point: Nationally consistent school improvement standards could be co-developed to include consistent measures of growth and progress at the school level.

d. Data and accountability

Current assessment mechanisms such as NAPLAN inform approaches to address student achievement at the state and territory level. NT levels of achievement

consistently present as lower than in any other jurisdiction despite significant investment and targeted initiatives; a keen reflection of the NT's complex issues and high socio-economic disadvantage. Additional difficulties exist in measuring data given student mobility, low attendance, low response rates and incomplete testing and language and cultural barriers. A recognised need lies in focusing on capturing consistent and credible data to better understand and respond to the needs of individual students.

An overarching national data strategy would promote collaboration between jurisdictions to build a national evidence base around systemic practice and student growth and achievement. While there has been a specific focus on building evidence around areas of high need, such as the National Consistent Collection of Data on School Students (NCCD), an evidence base needs to be available to improve outcomes across all student cohorts.

An overarching strategy would provide an evidence base and foundation to inform national school improvement standards and cross jurisdictional practice.

Key point: Develop an overarching national data strategy to inform systemic practice capturing growth and progress in the areas identified as part of the national reform plan, and provide an evidence base to implement national school improvement standards.

3. Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

The department aims to establish a model of school improvement that encompasses a sharp and narrow focus on the things known to make a difference to student growth. It is undertaking a number of existing national reforms and, as a small jurisdiction with high levels of disadvantage and remoteness and a limited economy of scale, continuing to increase the number and scope of national reforms has potential to detract from the actions targeted to meet needs at a school level. While we note the Review is not considering early childhood, the department submits that this aspect of a child's education should be considered critical to student success and outcomes and viewed within a holistic profile of Australia's education systems. The NT's Australian Early Development Census data shows that children in remote and very remote areas are the most disadvantaged when they start school, and that significant numbers of children living in Greater Darwin also show high levels of vulnerability and disadvantage. Participation in quality early childhood education has been shown to increase children's ability to participate in classrooms by increasing their capacity to self-regulate, positively engage with peers and become successful learners.

The department recognises the need to create a more viable and effective environment for early childhood service providers, and more considered funding arrangements for new programs, infrastructure and coordination of activities in

regional areas. More connected services are a priority, with strategic investment a focus of the plan. Without success in these areas, significant barriers will be felt by the department and a significant proportion of NT's students as they begin their education from a disadvantaged starting point.

Key point: The NT recognises early childhood education as critical to successful student learning as well as improving health and well-being outcomes for children. Fragmented and short term funding agreements undermine our intent to ensure NT children have access to a quality early childhood education and our ability to sustain a quality workforce.

Conclusion

The Northern Territory Department of Education is committed to teaching children and students the skills required in a changing world and providing options for their future. It values the opportunities provided at a national level to collaborate with other jurisdictions in implementing reforms aimed at driving education improvements. It recognises as critical the national funding model designed for use in improving school performance and student outcomes. It submits that sufficient time and flexibility must be incorporated into this model to ensure Australia's school systems are able to design and implement reforms in ways that suit the specific needs of their students and communities.

We are making progress and seek that the Panel consider our work, and that of other jurisdictions in education reform, and recommend reforms that enable and strengthen this important work from 2018 onwards.