

Mobile and Modular Teaching Units to Change Education Structures.

The interim report on the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) expresses frustration at the lack of progress, given the money spent, on “the appropriateness and effectiveness of the national reform initiatives in the NSRA”.

We believe the frustration arises in part from the constraints inherent to all state and territory education systems. Unless we change basic educational structures, we will continue to only tinker at the edges of reform and continue to experience frustration. As the Productivity Commission recognises “education is ripe for disruption.”

However, a major inhibitor of meaningful change could be that “*The Commission has focused on factors that can operate ‘within the school gates.’*” The problem is the “gates”. The “gates” perpetuate the well-recognised industrial model of education. They reinforce mindsets that silo students and curriculum. They perpetuate the inequities that remain constants behind the gate.

We strongly believe that meaningful reform aims for an education system without gates. The focus of the Commission should be on factors that CAN operate ‘within the school gates’ but aims, in the long term, to remove them. That is, the greatest impact will be on reforms that provide resources outside the gates and accessible by all.

We propose a model of mobile, modular teaching units that would form a mechanism of transition from our current broken system, to one that embeds an educational philosophy throughout the community.

Initially the units should be designed to address recognised priority equity cohorts. They would be made up of staff and resources that can be moved as a unit to priority communities, or have priority cohort students move to them. They would not segregate students by age but would provide a vertically-integrated or circular curriculum that students move through at their own speed, or move into and out of as needed, or as circumstances dictate. In the future they would be accessible to anyone in the community who wished to learn as well as inviting in those from the community who can make valuable contributions to the learning environment. Over time we will see the barriers between the student population and the community break down.

Mobile, modular units could address many of the concerns expressed in the NRSA interim review. They would:

- specifically address, and cater to, priority equity cohorts
- provide implementation flexibility and adaptability into the delivery of education;
- facilitate access to specialist education in critical areas;
- drive the development of on-line formative assessment tools (OFAI) on which the units could be based;
- provide an incubator for Quality Teaching Rounds;
- provide a potential interface between the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) institutes and the classroom;

- drive implementation of the unique student identifier (USI) to facilitate documentation of individual student achievement across a variety of modules.

The most profound effect of the NRSA would be to address the education deficits in priority equity cohorts. Flexibly designed and delivered units are the ideal mechanism for focusing on students who have fallen behind. They can be responsive for “targeted interventions”, “small group or one-to-one tuition” that “focus on the needs of a small number of learners, providing teaching that is closely matched to pupil understanding, and opportunities for greater levels of interaction and feedback.” It is imperative that restricted funding and resources are directed to where they will have the greatest effects and are not spread thinly across the whole education system.

For this submission, we have chosen not to provide specific details on how modular teaching units would function with respect to their staffing, composition, governance and accountability, since that would depend on the needs identified by states and territories. In general, however, units are inherently flexible.

They could tap into structures that already exist. Teaching and support staff for priority subject areas (e.g. Languages or STEM) could visit school sites or alternative sites in the case of bush-fire or flood effected communities. They could have a variety of support material travel with them, up to whole transportable Physics Labs for example.

They could visit weekly for a day at a time, to schools that already have Alternative Learning Programs with dedicated days for non-standard curriculum. Or they could visit for a more extended time to cover more material in a concentrated time. Students across all year levels would access face-to-face teaching at their individual level of understanding with experienced teachers, then continue to interact with specialist teachers on line between visits. Their progress would be documented using their USI.

Units could be staffed in such a way that Quality Teaching Rounds are inherently incorporated. Teachers at different levels of experience and expertise, including student and beginner teachers, could work together along with other priority specialist teachers for example in special education. Most importantly, units will provide an effective mechanism to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge by incorporating specialists as team members but also by inviting in local indigenous community members at the site of delivery.

Units could be associated with ITE institutes providing a more meaningful link between teacher training and teacher practice. They could also be vehicles to streamline pathways for mid-career entrants, especially people with skills in critical areas who could maintain an income as members within the units.

We believe that mobile modular units are a much more effective model than the traditional classroom to glean understanding of effective evidence-based teaching practices. The Commission will gain greater perspective using units that operate across an array of educational settings while the establishment and funding of these units will provide valuable resources to an overstretched system.

Jane Dixon: retired science teacher in the ACT
government sector, mid-career transition from
Associate Research Professor scientist.

Don Dixon: school principal in regional NSW

Peter Dixon: behaviour management specialist and
Physics teacher in NSW regional schools

Jim Dixon: mid-career transition from accountant to
primary school teacher, retired.