

**To:** Australian Government Productivity Commission  
**From:** Emeritus Professor John Halsey  
**Subject:** Feedback on the Review of the NSRA Interim Report  
**Date:** 19 October 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Review of the National School Reform Agreement Interim Report.

Before so doing, I want to formally acknowledge the quality and rigour of the Interim Report (IR).

My feedback is of two main kinds- an overview comment followed by some specific matters.

### **Overview**

The final report would benefit by the inclusion of a substantial section which details the salient characteristics of our society and foregrounds the key forces and dynamics that are continuously shaping and re-shaping who we are as a nation and who/what we are in the process of being and becoming.

I make this suggestion because the overriding impression is that the IR, though replete with research evidence and careful argument, essentially separates out schools and education from complex and at times messy and ambiguous relationships and connections with all of the other major societal shapers and influencers.

While recognising the AGPC has been allocated a very specific brief, it is critically important that the response to the brief foregrounds that progressing improvements in educational outcomes and opportunities is far bigger and wider than attending to a whole raft of school and education specific factors. Related to this, it is very pleasing and very appropriate that the challenges confronting rural, regional and remote education feature prominently in the IR.

John Carroll, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University, is someone who could write what I am advocating.

Secondly, the IR highlights the large and debilitating measuring, reporting and documenting workloads being placed on schools, teachers and principals to the detriment of time for actual teaching. Paradoxically though, one of the major emphases coming through the IR is the search for ways and means to further greater accountability. At the risk of over stating the case in order to make a point, the IR acknowledges that current policies and strategies have not yet delivered the intended outcomes but there seems to be a strong preference- again I may have misread- to double down on them.

### **Specific Matters**

1. [Would programs that provide intensive, targeted support to students who have fallen behind lend themselves to being a national policy initiative under the next intergovernmental agreement on schools?](#)

The short answer is potentially yes. However, there would need to be considerable policy and delivery flexibility to enable state and territory jurisdictions to design and respond to a very wide range of contexts and circumstances.

The information request plus some of the others in the IR has reminded me of the establishment of the Schools Commission in 1973 by the newly elected Whitlam Government. Of course there is a large range of views on the success or otherwise of the initiative and it also carries significant political overtones and baggage. Notwithstanding, for the lowest achievers with very limited choice and pathways, many of their blockages and success inhibitors are located outside of school as I have previously argued. The formation of a national multi human services agency to focus on building success capacities for individuals and communities has considerable merit.

2. Are there student cohorts, not identified as a priority equity cohort in the current National School Reform Agreement, such as children in out-of-home care, that should be a priority in the next agreement? If so, which cohorts and why?

Youth in secure care/state custody/detention. Specifically in the 2021 June quarter there were 819 young being held in detention, over 90% were male, 50% were ATSI and 72% were unsentenced. While the overall size of the cohort is small compared to most other groups, their potential resourcing impact is large per capita re incarceration services for a youth is of the order of \$1,500 per day.

3. What would be the costs and benefits of having people with lived experience involved in shared decision making in relation to reporting arrangements?

This is a very important proposal- part of the solution to administrative work overload for teachers, principals and schools is *genuine* involvement of those on the frontline who have to do the work in designing what work needs to be done, how and with what resources. I cannot cite specific dimensional data but my long and diverse experiences with education systems and authorities is that many of the 'reforms' which end up needing to be implemented by teachers and schools, are initiated and largely designed and driven by people outside/beyond schools who have very limited direct experience of schooling other than their own experiences as a student or a parent.

4. Should there be National Policy Initiatives to improve student wellbeing?

Yes and this should be expanded to include well being for teachers and school leaders and embrace outside the school fence contexts and issues as well. The pragmatic reality is that the wellbeing of each named though often having quite distinct elements, is inextricably linked. This is because all come together- and this is likely to endure indefinitely- in schools and other dedicated learning supports and services. An overwhelming characteristic of schools is that comparatively few adults- teachers, principals and para professionals- have full time custodial and pastoral responsibility for mostly minors as defined by law. This creates constant, persistent and at times excessive demands on interpersonal relations and behaviour patterns. There is a relentlessness to the dynamic because rarely is there an enduring one to one professional-client relationship. Massification is the dominant modus operandi.

5. Does the Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) process ensure pre-service teachers are sufficiently classroom ready?

Should TPAs meet a national minimum standard? If so, how might this be achieved?

Do TPAs ensure that pre-service teachers are well placed to respond to the needs of students from priority equity cohorts? If not, how might this be improved, and what trade-offs might this involve?

Optimising initial teacher preparation (ITP) is a hotly debated/contested topic in many circles including universities and certainly the media, especially in terms of graduates being 'classroom ready'. Given the current and likely future shortage of teachers (and aspiring principals), simply tinkering around the edges of ITP is unlikely to have any impact. Serious consideration needs to be given to establishing and appropriately

funding a national network- inner and outer urban; rural regional and remote- of leading edge practice schools. During the Baby Boom years following WW2, Demonstration Schools were used as one of the strategies to fast track teacher training. Student teachers attended up to one day a week every week of their initial training and then in a block release. The salient feature in terms of the national network proposal is that teachers in training were frequently exposed to and involved very directly in, the world of the classroom. The so called 'gap' between theory and practice was regular addressed.

6. Is teacher attrition more or less of a problem than in other professions? Are the drivers of attrition amenable to government policy? How could government policy address high teacher attrition? Do the drivers of attrition vary across the course of a teacher's career?

Re the questions in 6 my responses are:

- (1) I do not have any data on this matter but anecdotally it is similar to other human service professionals who increasingly feel their professional zone of expertise is being squeezed and manipulated to meet various short term political objectives
- (2) Potentially
- (3) Working assiduously to enhance the status and esteem of being a teacher
- (4) Likely yes- again based on many years of experience and recent anecdotal information

In an overall sense, there needs to be a concerted national effort to improve the status and esteem of being a teacher and a school principal. In my 56 years of working in the field of education from classroom teacher to principal to senior agency executive to ministerial chief of staff to university academic, ***I have never once had a parent or a student or a member of the public say I do not want a good teacher for my child/children; we do not need good teachers!*** Arguably though, much of the public discourse on teachers and teaching is deficit in character/tone/intent. University admission policies have also contributed via accepting low TER scores for ITA ( and in making this point I recognise that a TER score ought not be the sole basis for entry).

7. How are teaching assistants and support staff being deployed in schools and classrooms? What are the primary functions of teaching assistants and support staff in Australia? Could deployment and use of teaching assistants and support staff be improved to help reduce teacher workload? If so, should this be pursued through national collaboration?

Deployment and use of teaching assistants and support staff could be improved to help reduce teacher workload. The more significant matter is a rigorous analysis of all the drivers of teacher workload increase(s) linked to a rigorous commitment to make actual reductions. The primary work of teachers and principals- teaching/learning and nurturing the growth and well being of children and young people- is being overwhelmed and displaced by recording and accountability documentation requirements, coupled with schools being one of the few remaining ethically based institutions parents and the community can rely on (in the vast majority of cases) to care for their children. Put another way, schools have become (by default and partly by design) the one stop shop for neophyte human capital formation, but those working in them and running them have not been adequately trained, resourced or remunerated for this new 'fact'.

8. What (if any) systems do jurisdictions already have in place to understand what is being taught in classrooms, and how it is being taught? What are the options for obtaining more and better data on classroom practice in a way that minimises costs and administrative impost?

Re 'what options....'. A national release time scholarship (say 0.25-0.5 for a year on full salary and reserving all transfer and promotion rights) program for highly effective classroom teachers to be classroom practices/practitioner researchers.

9. Do principals have the resources, support and professional development opportunities required for their demanding roles? Are policy efforts to identify and prepare potential leaders effective? Are there alternative sources of school leaders, including from outside the teaching profession? What are the relative merits of a nationally coordinated approach to supporting a pipeline of future school leaders?

The questions in 9 above are so fundamental and of such critical importance to the future of schools and schooling that they warrant a major review cum report for consideration and then actioning by Australia's Education Minister's Meeting. In declaring this, the idea of sourcing school leaders from outside the teaching profession should be rejected outright. It is of fundamental importance that those who are the pinnacle leaders of schools know deeply and experientially teachers and teaching; children/students and their learning.