

Michael Brennan

Commissioner

Review of the National Schools Reform Agreement

Productivity Commission

Dear Commissioner,

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Review of the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) and respond to the Commission's Interim Report.

Over our 20 year history, SVA has taken a deep interest in the role of education as a key part of achieving our vision for an Australia in which all people and communities can thrive. SVA has incubated and delivered a number of successful education programs.

It is our view that the dual goals of achieving excellence and equity in education continue to be relevant because, as the Commission has highlighted, the data continues to show that the gap between the education outcomes for children from high socio-economic communities and those from low-socioeconomic communities is both large and enduring. We support finding 1.2 that: 'Persistent gaps in education outcomes for some student cohorts point to systemic problems'.

SVA agrees that many factors beyond schools contribute to disparity in learning outcomes (including health and wellbeing, exposure to trauma and violence, participation in the justice and out of home care systems, as well as access to preventative programs in early childhood). SVA is actively working in a number of these areas, particularly in early childhood interventions, but we have confined our comments here to the formal education system. If the Commission would like further information, we would be happy to provide detail about our work in intensive child and family services; supporting the growth and development of First Nations early learning sector; and the combination of early childhood services need to improve development outcomes when starting school.

SVA seeks solutions to complex and egregious social problems by considering the systems that can entrench problems as a whole and seeking to understand what changes are needed within systems to deliver better outcomes at scale. As a result, a number of our observations are about partnerships and relationships with the education system and how the interaction of these elements can drive improvements throughout the system. Further information about our evidence-informed perspective on the actions and drivers required to promote equity and a high-quality education system can be found in our [education perspective papers](#). These papers encompass drivers related to a supportive home and community environment, system configuration and formal education and consider how to improve outcomes for specific cohorts including children in out of home care, children disengaged from education and First Nations children.

SVA was one of the early advocates for elements of the existing NSRA. We offer some specific reflections on what has been achieved so far as well as sharing evidence and knowledge that we've gained through our work that is relevant to the questions raised by the Commission and the recommendations for future reforms.

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Given the context of the pandemic, it is perhaps not surprising that not as much progress was made on the NSRA initiatives as would be hoped. Nonetheless, there is value in the work.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (Information request 2.1)

SVA was one of the early advocates for the creation of a national education evidence institute, including through providing submissions to earlier Productivity Commission inquiries on the [National Education Evidence Base](#) and to the 'Gonski 2.0' review that resulted in the report *Through Growth To Achievement* which recommended the creation of a national evidence institute.

SVA also established what we believe to be the first national education evidence broker in Australia – [Evidence for Learning](#) (E4L). E4L was founded in 2015, in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in the United Kingdom, as a demonstration model for a future national body. E4L remains the exclusive Australian partner for the EEF, which has now established agreements with six organisations covering several countries including Cameroon, Chile, Jordan, the Netherlands and Spain.

The establishment of AERO is an important and commendable reform to help ensure that over time the investments made by governments can result in more evidence-informed practice in the classroom so that outcomes for children improve. As the Commission has observed, despite increased expenditure the outcomes for children have not improved, which begs a question about whether we are investing in the most effective approaches. Evidence generation, translation and mobilisation remains key to ensuring we do more of what works and less of what does not.

In considering the future of AERO, SVA would encourage the Commission to review the model we outlined in our earlier submissions for what is required from a national evidence broker (based on the global experience), how this works within Australian school and early learning systems (E4L operates across both) and how to create an effective evidence ecosystem. For example, one of the critical factors to success of similar models overseas is that they establish high levels of trust with educators – they stimulate and then meet the demand from educators – rather than supplying to pre-determined needs or gaps. Evidence brokers are successful when they empower and build the professional capacity of practitioners to put evidence into action.

Some areas where we think there are opportunities for further growth and development of a national evidence broker include:

- Prioritise the commissioning of high-quality trials (up to and including randomised control trials) of education initiatives, to improve the evidence of what works in the Australian context on topics that are areas of concern for educators and educational leaders. Systemic value and greater independence are created by commissioning rather than conducting trials as it helps to build a marketplace of researchers and program developers with greater expertise in how high-quality trials are run, and hence creates a multiplier effect where other parts of the system (including philanthropists) can similarly invest.

- Investment in mobilisation of evidence – building the capacity of educators, educational leaders and system leaders to put evidence into practice in order to improve learning outcomes for children and young people. This work involves supporting the decision-making capability of practitioners and leaders to combine the latest research evidence with professional judgement about the needs of students in their context. Achieving this at scale requires investment in authentic partnerships with multiple actors across the education ecosystem and the application of the evidence on systems change, behavioural change and [effective implementation in education settings](#). In the UK, for example, the EEF has created a Research Schools network to scale up evidence use, with appointed schools supporting the use of evidence in other schools.
- A strong role for a public advocate with rigorous and transparent evidence standards. Having an authoritative voice in the public debate with transparent evidence standards is crucial to ensuring that policy debates are informed and build awareness and trust with educators and researchers about the role of a national evidence institute. The importance of this function is one reason that SVA had advocated for an independent structure for AERO (in the UK this was achieved by creating the EEF through a government endowment then established as a charity.)
- Responding to the needs of educators and to meet emerging systemic challenges – seek to prioritise investments in building, sharing and mobilising evidence in areas of highest value to educators. For example, conducting themed rounds of work on improving outcomes for First Nations children, or on specific topics like managing problem behaviours or [understanding de-implementation](#), which are an increasing concerns for educators following the disruptions from Covid and challenges of workload.
- Seeking to work closely with First Nations communities on cultural appropriate evidence generation and use (in line with the PC's inquiry into an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy) that also seeks to value First Nations knowledge and expertise.

Unique Student Identifier (Draft recommendation 2.1 – Parties to the NSRA should fulfil their commitments to deliver key National Policy Initiatives)

- SVA continues to support the value of creating a unique student identifier. Though this is challenging, it remains a cornerstone of being able properly to understand the growth and progress toward education outcomes for particular groups and cohorts as well as significant opportunity to improve the ability and efficiency of generating evidence.

Supporting Teachers (Information Request 5.4 - Teaching Assistants and Support Staff)

- Given the challenges impacting the teaching workforce (shortages of teachers, challenges with retention, burnout during Covid and curriculum load) it is essential to ensure that other support staff are being used as effectively as possible.

- The [effective use of teaching assistants](#) is one area where there is a substantial body of evidence to suggest what works and established tools and guides on how to put this in practice.

School Leadership (Information Request 6.1 – Fostering School Leadership)

- One of the ways that SVA has sought to help address inequalities in outcomes between schools and address the gap in student learning has been through an initiative: [The Connection](#). The Connection has created collaborative networks of school leaders in high performing but low-ICSEA schools with other school leaders in low-ICSEA schools facing similar challenges, including interstate and between regional and metropolitan schools. It exposes school leadership teams to best practice and innovative thinking both locally and from across the globe. The initiative is designed to mobilise expertise and amplify the opportunity for impact systemically.
- Collaboration networks are identified as a support to education leaders to connect in ways professionally to support their growth and professional impact – see for example [Rethinking social networks for equity, excellence and flourishing](#).
- There is [emerging research](#) to suggest that collaboratively designed networks like the Connection can have an impact not just at the level of individual schools but can also operate to lift the overall performance of the system over time.
- We are currently exploring opportunities to develop similar networks specifically for regional, remote and rural schools; schools with a high proportion of First Nations students, as well as in early education and transitions from school to work.

If you require any further information about our research or initiatives, we would welcome the opportunity to speak with the Commission.

Kind regards,

Patrick Flynn