Response to Review of the National School Reform Agreement

Introduction

Thank you to The Commission for enabling feedback on the review of the NSRA. The material you have provided in your interim report is invaluable to gaining an understanding about the challenges facing students, teachers, school leaders and unions throughout Australia. From firsthand experience in working frontline or 'at the cliff face' as a teacher in a secondary school setting however, The Commission's report still falls short in presenting 'real life' working knowledge of the impact of system policies, processes and procedures at ground zero in school classrooms. Expecting strategic policy intiatives at National and State levels to address daily outcomes within national classrooms by individual teachers requires considerably more coordination and understanding of the expectations that The Commission invariably places on the shoulders of those teachers in school-based work places. As astute and as informative as the evidence-based research material used in the interim report may be, there is a grey area in both qualitative and quantitative evidence that is not being addressed sufficiently by the targets and outcomes desired in the NSRA. Feedback on some of these grey areas is provided below.

The Commission is seeking feedback on options for gleaning a better understanding of what occurs in the classroom, including the extent to which evidence-based practices are adopted

In translating National Policy Initiatives (NPI) to the classroom the policies travel down a heirarchy of managerial levels to finally disperse in teacher briefings at a school level. The teacher through Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is trained and qualifed to enter the classroom and teach numeracy and literacy within a smorgasbord of subject/discipline areas. The teacher is not trained in social work, medicine, policing, and psychiatry but must demonstrate some knowledge of these occupational fields the instant they walk into a classroom because, as a teacher, they must be able to build an immediate relationship with their students. The students as identified in the interim report come from very diverse backgrounds. While every effort is made in most schools to ensure that inclusivity occurs within classrooms to ensure all students (including those students from *priority equity cohorts*) are supported, the inevitable fallback within schools is 'the teacher'. All the NPIs, State and regional education policies - in fact every concievable outcome from the classroom - falls squarely in reality and everyday life on the shoulders of one individual, the teacher. Yet, very few of those teachers will read the report from the Review of the National School Reform Agreement. Many won't have input into reforms because they are not personally included in the development of National, State and Territories school outcome evaluation, focus and desires about their job. Yet, the lead, and often only person engaging and directing learning within classrooms throughout Australia is expected to know and innovatively implement responses to every one of the challenges listed in the National School Reform Agreement interim report daily.

When The Commission discusses the ITE, and teacher workload within schools in Australia, The Commission invariably must realise that they are speaking to a person (the teacher) who may have class loads of up to 120 – 150 students per week. The teacher is not an institution but has been systematically installed in one since their ITE. Failure to recognise how NPI are effectively translated into the classroom is one reason why our students and schools are in the

educational mess they are in today. A teacher does not just *typically spend most of their time on teaching, lesson planning, marking and general administration*. Teachers typically also spend much of their day socialising students (developing good citizenship within the school community), and - for the thousands upon thousands of students in priority equity cohorts and disengaged from learning because of unidentified disabilities, location, poor social experiences, and poor wellbeing - managing behaviours. The teacher does this not because they lack the training or passion to innovatively impart the Australian Curriculum, but because students identified from priority equity cohorts and disengaged from learning, either cannot or will not engage and participate in learning regardless of how engaging the lessons the teacher has prepared are taught, or how much effort the teacher gives to the student. Simply managing a class of 30 students for 60-70 minutes with the diversity discussed in the NSRA interim report, is a feat for a teacher let alone trying to enable each individual student to learn the subject/discipline the teacher is attempting to teach. Statistically, the teacher cannot equitably and fairly devote more than two-minutes of their class time to the individual needs of a student in a class of 30 students. Nowhere else in our society today is a person in a professional occupation expected to manage the behaviours and learning of a person while addressing the individual needs of that person in a large group formation. The clergy once sought to do this from the pulpit, but inevitably this form of teaching and control results in disenchantment and rebellion.

Fostering expertise would improve teaching

While it is admirable that a teacher career pathway has been established in the positions Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALTs), the AERO observation is correct. "We are not effectively utilising our best teachers ... our existing teacher career paths do not systematically build, recognise, and deploy teaching expertise ... to create a quality teaching workforce". The HALTs pathway requires further study for teachers who are already working full-time between 44 to 57 hours a week during term time (p11 Interim Report), and who are often marking and planning during school holidays at the expense of their own leisure and family time. While some post-graduate learning would be expected for professional advancement, the teachers most in demand in schools are those who successfully demonstrate expertise in their classrooms. They are often also the teachers least able to withdraw from the classroom to participate in post-graduate teaching and learning because of the demands of their job and trying to manage an out of school life balance. Systematically, the best teachers are also the teachers who can have the hardest workloads - often the highest proportion of students from identified *priority equity cohorts* and those disengaged from learning due to wellbeing, or classes of excel students to improve school quantitative outcome data – success ratios for student cohorts to improve school funding and entry ratings (school of choice data). Sadly, this effort, passion, energy, and dedication, is seldom recognised because the pathway for the best classroom teachers begins and ends in the classroom.

From a second perspective on this topic, while accepting specialists or people with relevant non-educational work knowledge into the teaching profession to overcome teacher shortages is an idea very much supported, many schools and education departments in Australia have a hierarchy that does not recognise teachers' experiences obtained outside the school institutional environment. It's a pathetic excuse, tantamount to bigotry, for not promoting or acknowledging a person's resourcefulness from outside the education sector, but one repeatedly experienced by specialist teachers. One need only look at selection criteria and

outcomes for positions in schools and within departments of education, to notice the supremacy of candidates who in demonstrating micro school experience are then deemed ready for management positions. A teacher with work and life experience – whether as a successful lawyer, engineer, scientist, manager, economist, builder, artist, or other specialist, that meets all selection criteria from their personal experience (be it macro or micro), must be able to demonstrate the same resourcefulness and abilities in a school environment (which is generally more micro) or fade into oblivion. Alas, this is an impossibility unless the specialist teacher can undertake temporary higher duties as a deputy principal or head of department (or similar role) – the first visible rung of promotion. Sadly, specialist teachers soon find that their progress within schools is very limited, they may earn significantly less than in their previous employment, work significantly harder, volunteer to assist school improvement, but frequently not receive any acknowledgement for their high-level teaching qualities, and become sufficiently disillusioned to then end their teaching career. Much more is needed to support specialist teachers within the education sector by changing the synergy and bias toward specialists within schools and the education sector, and by supporting diversity and higher-level specialist knowledge among teachers.

The Commission is seeking stakeholder views on:
- the benefits, costs and risks of proposed enhancements to accountability mechanisms for the next intergovernmental agreement, including:
**** jurisdictions specifying the outcomes that they expect to achieve (and related indicators) over the life of the agreement in public 'implementation plans' and reporting on progress annually. This would be in addition to identifying what measures they pursue in each priority reform area (as per current practice for bilateral agreements)***
**** aligning the design of outcomes and indicators across jurisdictions to allow comparability***
- ways of ensuring groups representing school systems (Independent, Catholic), teachers, principals and students have effective input into policy formation (such as requiring jurisdictions to receive and publish input from affected parties as part of preparing implementation plans).

Over the last decade I have rarely seen classroom teachers being given the personal opportunity for attending conferences or forums where they might input into policy formation. Often the excuse is cost and funding, but otherwise teachers are not made aware of these opportunities or are prevented from attending due to staff shortages. Input about classroom teaching is generally left to the school's leadership team/senior management. The teachers therefore seldom have an individual voice in the process of policy formation. This can be very confronting. For example, it is a school practice among many schools, that regional office goals and objectives are directly imposed on teachers. If the regional office goal is that 90% of students pass in all subject/discipline areas the goal is not at any time negotiated with the teacher. Nor does the goal therefore accurately enable and reflect consideration of the percentage of students from *priority equity cohorts* and those disengaged from learning due to social and physical wellbeing. The goal is subsequently unmanageable for the teacher as it does not allow for local variables in student cohort abilities and learning. This is an actual goal, but it is also reflective of how implementation of strategic plans and policies can filter into a school system and become obscured and negated into obsolescence.

Unfortunately, in the hierarchal chain of command within schools, the opinions, and perspectives of the classroom teacher about policy matters are frequently ignored and diminished. It is not uncommon for teachers to be confronted and disciplined by senior management if the teacher "oversteps the status of their pay scale (i.e., rank)!" A teacher who might respond to this interim report for example, could be disciplined or otherwise chastised for their opinion/perspective. This prevents innovation and growth within schools.

Intensive, targeted support for students who have fallen behind

If students have fallen behind there should be intensive and targeted support. However, this cannot occur in classrooms of 30 students. Inadequate school resourcing – teachers and teacher aides - is the problem here. Few (if any) teachers can work with students who are frustrated, abusive, and disengaged, for long periods of time if they can only devote 2-10 minutes in a lesson to the individual student. Lack of school resourcing and support plays a major role in students falling behind in this situation. Dedicated streaming of similar/like students, together with small class groups of up to a maximum of ten students, would be more manageable for a teacher in the classroom but, doubtless, less acceptable for schools in terms of funding and the individual student who would be concerned with stigma and potential bullying within the wider school environment. This is exactly why the school as an institution needs to change.

As indicated in the interim report, some social – location, cultural and disability norms are not readily adopted into school rules and operations. Institutionally, schools are often a conduit for social control that in fits of rebellion result in behavioural consequences created from social issues. In review, it must be questioned - if teachers must demonstrate that they are culturally and disability inclusive, and supportive of all students from diverse backgrounds, then where must schools draw the line for social expectations and standards in limiting social impact on students? Why must it be a duty for teachers to police in schools? Ethically, there is a blurred line in social opinion and school expectations. Teachers are trained to teach the Australian Curriculum, but school and social expectations insist that teachers also teach social etiquette - for example, student use of mobile phones, laptops, iPads, eating in classrooms, running on footpaths, nail polish, hair colour, incorrect uniform clothing, stationery, breakfast and lunches, and smoking. While upholding school standards and legal 'duty of care' requirements are reasonable excuses for teachers to control student behaviours, the role of policing can be shared much more widely within the school environment but largely removes parental responsibility for student preparedness for school. This is one task in schools today that has moved from the family to the classroom. It is a task that should not fall on the teacher but has added greatly to the teacher's workload.

The pattern of subject assessment and reporting must also be adjusted. It has long been said that schools cannot adopt a 'one shoe fits all' model of teaching and learning. Since students should be assessed on their merits then assessments and reporting should also reflect personal student effort, resilience, rigour, behaviour, and ability.

Conclusion

To conclude, while there are many excellent suggestions contained in the Review of the NSRA interim report, the entire outcome of recommendations and suggestions will inevitably

filter to the classroom teacher. It is not the school leadership team/senior management or the policy makers who are frontline in the teaching and learning of students in Australia's classrooms, it is the classroom teacher. For this reason it is asked that The Commission consider what impact the final report will have not just on schools as institutions for learning, but on teachers themselves, especially given the vast numbers of teachers who are now considering leaving the profession.