

## SUBMISSION to the Review of National School Reform Agreement – Interim Report. 2022

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1997) in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education* identified three qualities necessary for responsible citizenship in a complex world. The first is the ability to critically examine oneself and one's traditions. The second is an ability to see beyond immediate group loyalties and extend to strangers the moral concern we naturally extend to friends and kin.

The third is the development of what she calls the narrative imagination which is the ability to see unobvious connections between sequences of human actions and to recognise their likely consequences, intended and unintended.

I commend the Commission for its role in enabling us all to critically examine ourselves. I also welcome the articulation and recognition that *the label 'priority equity cohorts' masks significant diversity in students' learning needs and educational aspirations. This diversity reflects differences in their life experiences, the education outcomes they value, their learning and wellbeing outcomes, and the nature of adjustments and supports they may require.*

*Addressing the needs of these students relies on adopting a person-centred approach, which recognises that being in a priority equity cohort does not equate to disadvantage. Rather, it is the experiences of these students, both within and outside the education system that affects their educational achievement. The Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting observed:*

*[The] labelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families as disadvantaged continues to play into a culture of deficit discourse and low expectations that stymie Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to thrive in their education ... While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities face a range of complex and compounding circumstances that impact their educational engagement and outcomes, they are not inherently disadvantaged by being Indigenous. (sub. 52, p. 3)*

I also welcome the recognition of the problems a 'one size fits all approach' creates for learning and all those in the learning community.

The report states

*Promoting equity can be thought of as recognising that some students (I would like to include all students in this statement) may have different educational needs and desired outcomes — including in relation to culture and language — and creating an education system that is able to adapt to these needs. However, outcome measures and feedback from stakeholders highlight that equity remains a key challenge for the Australian education system.*

If we ask the question **what is the purpose of education** and we answer, **to be as high as possible in national and international rankings**, that will drive, and I believe has driven, how education has developed. After decades of doing the same thing, education according to the prescribed judgement and criteria of data driven accountability and the expenditure of billions of dollars has not improved or shifted both learning and equity in our system. It is time to have a serious look at the possibility that the process itself has driven this outcome. That adage of keeping on doing the same thing, only more of it and faster and stronger, more intensely and then getting the same or worse results, has to be seriously examined. We have continued to allow this to drive a narrowing of curricula, increasing pressure and judgement on students and teachers to perform, allowing burn out and resignations to increase, increasing hours of work and paperwork. An inevitable picture of stagnation and at times apparent failure has become the norm and perplexes those who think more and more money will fix it.

I want to ask a different question. **If we want to have and live in a democratic society where the citizens are an engaged, active, caring polity, where everyone is productive and contributing to the wellbeing of the whole community according to their capabilities, what kind of education would enable that?** I think our educational 'narrative imagination' will be very different and our intended and unintended consequences will be very different. I want to add here that I use productive in the fullest sense of this word and according to the charter of the commission which does consider the economic role but also the social and environmental roles of education reforms

One of my key answers is that we need a diversity of education, a diversity of accountability processes and review processes and a bureaucracy that is as supportive as possible, one which enables communities to achieve this. You are tasked with reviewing why education results are stagnating why Australia despite its expenditure does not improve its international ranking why so many young people

are missing out and not receiving an equitable education. I say stop measuring and turn your gaze to other ways of doing this.

Can a diversity of review processes work and be effective? Some international evidence would indicate this is possible. In the UK Summerhill School has recently celebrated its centenary. Its two most recent inspections have been conducted by the private school inspection organisation known as ISI - Independent Schools Inspection Service and with whom the school has established a good working relationship. ISI is one of three independent inspection services licensed by the state inspection service OFSTED to conduct inspections of private schools in England and British Schools Overseas (BOAS). The other two are Penta International and EDT. If you register as a private school in England, you will have a pre-registration inspection of paperwork by OFSTED, then if this is approved you can open and expect a full inspection from Ofsted in first 12 months. If there is approval at this point you can either stay with OFSTED or choose to move to ISI for the next inspection. If you are a private school, you do not have to teach the national curriculum, but you are expected to meet the requirements of the independent schools' framework/regulations. Summerhill, Sands, the New School, Atelier 21 have achieved this, and OFSTED and ISI have now accepted 'Democratic School' as a category of school. All this applies only to England, - Wales has a more progressive set-up called OFSTIN - also Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Some international democratic schools teaching in English such as Kaleide in the Canaries (Spain) are choosing not to be inspected by ISI or Penta or EDT but are looking to the US for accreditation (which also by-passes the local inspection system but more creatively than ISI) e.g., NEASC (New England Schools and Colleges Association).

Could we not imagine different curricula, review, and accountability processes for our first nations children, our second language learners, our out of home children, our students that are constantly being found wanting and rejected from our mainstream schools, our small schools, our democratic schools, our variety of schools?

It is time to hand back education to where it belongs, to the hands and hearts of those living and experiencing this and those who support them. It is time to recognise the authority and agency of the children and young people, the teachers and schools and learning communities wherever they are and in all their diverse forms and possibilities. It is time to redirect the power and control that the official authorities have developed

as at times, brutalist, scrutinising, critical, controlling energy sapping power structures into developing relationships with the different learning communities and playing supporting, enabling roles.

You recognise that First Nations people plead to stop their classification as disadvantaged based on the reality of being indigenous. It is time to shift the stubborn position they occupy as failures of the education system and recognise their strengths, resilience, capabilities, and value their different ways of learning and looking at the world.

It is time to actively support the people who put their whole lives into learning and living with children and young people instead of imposing and continuing a system and which inevitably leads to the failure cycle continuing.