

# Review of the National School Reform Agreement Interim Report – NSW Department of Education Response

## Introduction

The NSW Government welcomes new ideas and approaches to enhance national collaboration in schooling, aligned with the goals of equity and excellence in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration.

This response to the Interim Report supplements the NSW Government positions contained in the initial NSW submission to this review.

The NSRA has coincided with a number of historic challenges which have put significant pressure on schools across NSW and Australia. The impact of COVID-19, as well as a number of natural disasters provides an important context for all the findings of this review. The very real successes achieved by students, teachers and schools should also be acknowledged.

## **A new paradigm for national collaboration is needed to achieve reform that lifts student outcomes**

NSW agrees that a new paradigm is needed in terms of national collaboration to achieve the best results for students. This was a key theme of the NSW Government Submission to this review. NSW welcomes the Commission's finding that the next intergovernmental agreement should focus on a smaller number of more focused NPIs that are co-ordinated and include more state-based flexibility.

## **There is potential to strengthen and leverage evidence-based research to support teaching and learning**

NSW supports measures to continue to strengthen the national evidence base. A new national agreement provides an opportunity to further enhance and leverage the newly established Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). This could be achieved by working in collaboration with state-based evidence and research bodies such as the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) to provide support to the school sector nationally.

There is a strong case to raise the profile of AERO, to maximise its impact both at a system and classroom level. AERO's tools and resources should be easily translated into teacher strategies that are accessible and easily implemented and to inform system wide policy on teaching and learning.

In addition to the need to support and better leverage national level research, we note there is a significant research agenda already underway within NSW that can contribute to the national evidence base. The NSW Department of Education has a world-leading research body in the form of CESE which conducts rigorous analysis into best practice pedagogical models and delivers evidence-based advice to inform state based education policy and the teaching profession.

A flagship reform in NSW is the School Success Model, which helps to identify and scale best practice classroom teaching across the system. In addition, large numbers of schools are now using PLAN 2 (Planning Literacy and Numeracy) software, which is a tool that can be used to monitor student progress against national progressions and record effective practice.

## **The Unique Student Identifier should be implemented.**

NSW considers that the Unique Student Identifier (USI) should be developed as a matter of urgency and is prepared to lead the development of a national USI. The USI will enable us to track students' education journey and inform policy responses to improve teaching and learning, and student support. It will be of benefit to individual students and the system as a whole by allowing identification of student need as they move through the education system and greater responsiveness as challenges emerge. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning has further exacerbated existing complexities and a greater cohort of students are at risk of falling through the cracks if action is not taken.

## **Accountability and reporting mechanisms need to be carefully considered and designed**

NSW noted in our submission to the review, that the experience of implementing the NPIs in the current NSRA demonstrates a need for strengthened accountability from the Commonwealth, states and territories for reforms in the next school funding agreement. However, accountability must be designed carefully to have a clear rationale, governance and avoid a disproportionate focus on compliance and reporting instead of outcomes.

Accountability and reporting must be framed in terms of mutual obligation and reciprocity between all jurisdictions. This means the Commonwealth must recognise and support the role of states and territories as school system managers and majority funders for government schools. Accountability should reflect mutual commitment, where the Commonwealth uses its funding and policy levers to support state and territory initiatives on key issues.

Reporting on the impact of national initiatives does also pose challenges that must be considered. We agree with the importance of tracking the impact of national and bilaterally agreed initiatives. However, the challenge of measuring the impact of individual initiatives should not be underestimated (given the complex in-school and out-of-school factors impacting student outcomes). Global research has shown that it can take up to a decade to see the full impact of large-scale policy initiatives in education – much longer than the life of a single agreement.

NSW has concerns in terms of a focus on overly prescriptive implementation plans. The experience of the NSRA thus far is that specific NPIs, and a nationally consistent approach has slowed their design and implementation and limited innovation. Given the report acknowledges the need for greater state/territory flexibility with NPIs this seems at odds with the report's recommendation for greater prescription in implementation.

It should be noted that there are already extensive reporting arrangements in place in relation to students from priority equity cohorts, including NAPLAN reporting, ACARA's National Report on Schooling, the Productivity Commissions Report on Government Services, and the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.

## **NSW remains committed to lifting outcomes for all students and in particular priority equity cohorts**

The NSW Government strongly supports the principles of equity and excellence in student outcomes as outlined in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration. Education helps to reduce the impact of disadvantage on people's lifelong outcomes, and to weaken the link between disadvantage and the likelihood of lower educational achievement. This goal underpins existing national objectives and measures including reducing achievement gaps for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, increasing attendance for equity cohorts, and lifting year 12 or equivalent attainment rates for priority cohorts. National targets must continue to prioritise closing learning and attainment gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged students— both to achieve the system's equity promise and to improve system performance overall.

NSW has significant state-based action underway to support priority cohorts, including small group tuition, Inclusive, Engaging and Respectful Schools Reforms and Aboriginal Learning and Engagement Centres. These reforms address the case for change to better support students with specific educational needs. These policies have been designed to better meet the diverse learning and wellbeing needs of our students, particularly those in rural and remote locations, students with disability and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. NSW notes the findings in the report that intensive small group tuition can be a useful tool. The NSW Government responded to COVID-19 learning loss by funding the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program (COVID ILSP) in 2021 and 2022. Qualitative evidence gathered through ongoing evaluation of COVID ILSP indicates the program has been very well received by schools and is having a positive impact on learning. The Department is currently exploring how this learning approach can help inform any future system support to embed small group tuition into ongoing practice in schools.

## **NSW is focused on retaining and attracting a high-quality teaching workforce**

NSW acknowledges the vital role that a high-quality teaching workforce has in ensuring the best possible learning and wellbeing outcomes for students, and agrees that it is well-suited as a national focus. The value of national collaboration in this area is evident through the recent formation of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan.

Additionally, NSW has established initiatives such as the NSW Teacher Supply Strategy, which need to be considered when developing new strategies. Work to retain and attract a high-quality teacher workforce includes a range of variables, and opportunities for initiatives. A key action by NSW in this space is the School Leadership Institute, established in 2018, which provides a range of rigorous development programs for current and future schools leaders. Additionally, NSW has established an additional permanent middle leadership role, the Assistant Principal, Curriculum & Instruction, in NSW public schools with P-6 enrolments to collaboratively lead evidence-informed literacy and numeracy teaching and assessment practices for improved student learning outcomes across the curriculum.

NSW and its stakeholders have concerns about the suggestion to source non-teaching school leaders. These roles require critical knowledge, skills and understanding of all aspects of teaching, learning and leadership, and in NSW our school leaders are rightly required to be accredited as a teacher. NSW will continue to work to attract aspiring school leaders through mid-career teaching programs, and provide them with a pathway into leadership that ensures they have crucial experience.