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National School Reform Agreement
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins St East
Melbourne Vic 8003

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Review of the National School Reform Agreement

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the initial stage of the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

In this submission we respond to the Productivity Commission's invitation to consider 'types of new policy initiatives or actions that might be appropriate to include in the next national school reform agreement given that many of the NPIs (National Policy Initiatives) have met, or are close to meeting, their final milestones'.

Recognising the drivers of system transformation to grasp new opportunities

While governments quite rightly set an agenda for education that reflects the interests of the state, it is Australian educators who have been successfully leading the ongoing transformation of Australian school education within the bounds of government regulation.

That educators are highly influential not just in the development and education of the students in their care but as primary agents of education transformation was demonstrated conclusively by the agility and innovation with which schools and educators were able to adapt to the provision of remote teaching and learning during 2020 and 2021. The forced shift to online education delivery as a result of COVID-19 measures also highlighted the role of commercial "edtech" providers as agents of transformation in Australian schooling. We see, too, that students are demanding greater agency in their education and learning pathways since their experience of remote learning.

If the nation is to capitalise on the opportunities created by COVID-19 disruption to review, 'reset' and reform Australian school education, it is important that the role of educators, students and commercial providers as change agents is recognised. Further, realisation of these opportunities demands that national education policymaking must also be reviewed and reset.

Federal and state and territory governments have significant financial and regulatory muscle to determine new directions for Australian education, and a "carrot and sticks" approach to implementing these directions can be the default approach adopted by governments. AHISA

proposes that a strengths-based approach to policymaking has the potential to build on the gains already made by schools over the last two-and-a-half years and to provide the collaborative platform that will power further development.

AHISA has developed a policy manifesto setting out the rationale for a strengths-based approach to policymaking in education. We identify six key areas where such an approach could assist in progressing Australian school education following COVID disruption:

1. Supporting the digital transformation of Australian education
2. Upskilling the teaching profession
3. Re-establishing & strengthening students' learning journeys
4. Supporting student wellbeing
5. Strengthening all levels of school leadership
6. Engaging parents in their children's education

We do not propose that these six policy areas should constitute National Policy Initiatives for the next NSRA. As you will see from our policy document, which is attached to this submission, these policy areas do however intersect with work under way within existing National Policy Initiatives and with the work of Australia's National Education Architecture.

We offer the suggested approaches in the policy manifesto as examples of how governments can cooperate not just with each other under the umbrella of the NSRA but with educators and schools as transformative agents in their own right.

We expect to make a further submission to the Productivity Commission's review when an Interim Report is released. In the meantime, should you require further detail or clarification of the points raised, please contact me at telephone (02) 6247 7300, or via email at ceo@ahisa.edu.au.

Yours faithfully,

(Ms) Beth Blackwood

AHISA Chief Executive Officer

AHISA Ltd is a professional association for Heads of independent schools. Our 450 members lead schools that collectively account for some 450,000 students, representing 70 per cent of independent sector enrolments and over 11 per cent of total Australian school enrolments. Some 20 per cent of Australia's total Year 12 students are educated in AHISA members' schools.

AHISA's members lead a collective workforce of over 45,000 teaching staff and some 28,700 support staff.

National education policymaking and the transformation of Australian school education

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STUDENTS, PARENTS & EDUCATORS TO BE
CHANGE MAKERS IN SCHOOLS

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This policy manifesto was first issued by AHISA in March 2022 to contribute to debate on education policy in the lead up to the 2022 federal election. It is our hope it will continue to inform debate during the life of Australia's 47th Parliament.

Queries regarding the document may be emailed to enquiries@ahisa.edu.au.

National education policymaking and the transformation of Australian school education

The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has created the opportunity to 'reset' school education in Australia. To fully benefit from this opportunity, national education policymaking must also be reviewed and reset.

In the last two years, the demands of remote learning on schools, teachers and students have created curiosity and expectation around the possibilities for re-shaping education delivery. While many have commented on the need for schools to repair, renew and reset in the light of COVID-19, there has been little public discussion on what impact disruptions to schooling during COVID-19 lockdowns might have on approaches to national policymaking in education.

The time is ripe to review and reset approaches to national education policymaking to ensure Australian schools have ready support as they rebuild and reshape learning pathways to help all students achieve their best possible futures.

New opportunities demand new policy approaches

Australia's school system, while largely regulated and owned by state and territory governments, benefits from the strengths of its national education architecture as represented by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), Education Services Australia (ESA) and the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). Not the least of these strengths is the high regard which these institutions have earned from educators.

There has also been a welcome commitment to extensive consultation with the schools sector by Australian Government departments and agencies. Such consultation is vital if policy implementation is to be managed well. Further innovation is required, however, at the point where policies are first formed.

By adopting a strengths-based approach to policymaking, the Australian Government can take leadership of national initiatives to ensure Australia's schools have the capacity to capitalise on opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic and have the support they need to accelerate their transformation in response to rapid technological and social change. Building on the strengths of schools and systems will also ensure that all students have access to the learning pathways and tools they need to achieve their best.

AHISA offers examples of how strengths-based policies can rapidly strengthen Australia's school system in six key areas, described in more detail on the following pages:

1. Supporting the digital transformation of Australian education
2. Upskilling the teaching profession
3. Re-establishing & strengthening students' learning journeys
4. Supporting student wellbeing
5. Strengthening all levels of school leadership
6. Engaging parents in their children's education

A strengths-based policy approach will support the transformation of Australian schools

A strengths-based approach to policy-making in school education:

- Recognises the professional expertise of teachers and school leaders
- Recognises that schools are operating strategically within a continuous cycle of development or improvement
- Recognises the value of and supports diversity in educational provision and pathways for students
- Recognises that the continued successful evolution of Australia's schooling system depends on schools having the autonomy to experiment, research and trial or adapt ideas and practices.

1. Supporting the digital transformation of Australian education

1a. Rethinking education provision

A demand for greater personalisation in student learning, allied to increased choice among online offerings by schools and other education providers is changing the perception of schooling as geographically defined. Considerable work has also been done on alternative ways to assess and report on students' achievements, skills and capabilities.

Possible foci for national policy action include:

- The states and territories have agreed to the introduction of a Unique Student Identifier. As governments move toward the introduction of a USI, the federal government could investigate the potential to create a national platform for a digital learning passport for students, linked to their USI.
- More flexible models of education would require a review of current legislation, regulation, curriculum delivery and student assessment and certification to determine what, if any, structural elements must change to enable provision changes, including: the definition of 'student attendance' to accommodate off-campus learning; accreditation of external resources to meet curriculum requirements and standards; moderation of internal and external examinations and/or assessment; and the impact on per student recurrent funding. If students are able to 'bundle' their choice of courses. The federal government is well placed to lead a national approach to such challenges through the Education Ministers Meeting and the Australian Education Senior Officials Committee (AESOC).
- The federal government has executed significant reforms in the post-school education and training sectors both prior to and in response to COVID-19 to create greater flexibility in these sectors to address the demand for re-skilling of Australia's workforce. In light of these innovations, the federal government could commission a review of their potential impact on schooling provision.

1b. Creating digital connections

Remote learning in 2020 and 2021 revealed gaps in schools' and students' access to the means to deliver and/or participate in education opportunities that rely on digital technologies.

Governments have a primary role in ensuring all schools and students are equipped with the appropriate digital hardware, software, internet access and bandwidth to enable Australia's school system to continue its digital transformation and to ensure all students are able to access the opportunities this transformation brings.

Provision made during COVID-19 lockdowns – such as school-based laptop/tablet loans to students, low-fee access to internet connection and cheaper access to internet/satellite coverage in regional and remote areas – provides a wealth of evidence on the nature of digital gaps and how schemes to bridge those gaps might inform national effort involving the federal and state and territory governments.

2. Upskilling the teaching profession

2a. Accelerating teachers' acquisition of digital skills

In 2020 and 2021 teachers rapidly learnt digital delivery skills 'on the job'. To give recognition to these skills for the purposes of professional learning and re-registration requirements, and to encourage further skills development to support the digital transformation of education, teachers must be given the opportunity to certify and further polish the technological and online teaching skills acquired for remote delivery.

Teacher accreditation is regulated by state and territory governments, which also specify the professional learning requirements for teachers to maintain ongoing registration. Even so, the federal government has achieved substantial national coherence in initial teacher education and teaching standards through the work of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

Through AITSL, the Australian Government could commission the development of free online short courses to give all teachers the option to build on new skills and fill skills gaps to help create a teacher workforce able to use digital technologies for student learning both in the classroom and online. The Australian Government could negotiate with the states and territories to gain agreement to national accreditation of such courses to meet teachers' professional learning requirements.

2b. Embedding new skills in Initial teacher education (ITE)

ITE courses must now cover what have become new basic skills for teachers following the disruption of COVID-19: online lesson preparation and online teaching skills; skills in monitoring and supporting student health and wellbeing; and skills in helping parents engage with their children's learning.

The Australian Government is well-positioned to initiate this inclusion through its role in setting the framework for accreditation of ITE courses.

2c. Encouraging teachers to develop mentoring skills

The Australian Government can support the development of ITE students and graduates, and the ongoing professional development of teachers, by assisting experienced teachers to acquire mentoring and coaching skills.

The Government could task AITSL – which already provides [online resources](#) for teachers to help them develop coaching skills – to develop a framework for certified online courses in teacher mentoring. While certified courses on mentoring are available through some state and territory departments of education, the Government could subsidise certified online courses offered by universities which also offer ITE, with the possibility of such courses counting towards post-graduate qualifications.

The development of mentoring courses by university education faculties or departments could help enrich the support given to schools hosting ITE students on practicum placements.

3. Re-establishing & strengthening students' learning journeys

Identifying & bridging learning gaps

Students' experience of learning remotely in 2020 and 2021 was far from uniform, and there is concern that some students have not made the same achievement gains they would have if attending classes on school campuses. At the same time, for many families, remote learning has increased the engagement of parents in their children's learning.

- The federal government could commission and fund the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to develop simplified voluntary online assessments to enable individual students, parents or guardians, schools and systems to quickly identify any learning gaps and track ongoing achievement. Such assessments could be linked either to the [Online Formative Assessment Initiative](#) based on ACARA's work on literacy and numeracy progressions and already in development, or to components of the Australian Curriculum.
- At least one state has initiated a tutoring program within its schools to help students accelerate their learning post COVID-19 lockdowns. The federal government could direct the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) to commission a review of state-based 'catch up' tutoring programs and other approaches to identify which are the most effective in helping students meet learning targets or bridge gaps in students' learning, eg small group tutoring at school, individual in-class catch up from teacher aides, in-home one-on-one tutoring or online one-on-one tutoring.
- AERO is currently preparing a platform for the sharing of teacher-produced resources. ACARA already has a range of resources available linked to the Australian Curriculum, AITSL hosts video 'illustrations of practice' and ESA makes extensive teacher resources available through its 'Scootle' portal and other sites. Drawing on the work of these organisations, and building on increased parental engagement and students' skills in self-directed learning resulting from COVID-19 remote learning, the Australian Government could fund creation of a free online 'bank' of video tutorials linked to the Australian Curriculum that students and parents could access to help bridge learning gaps. To help expedite creation of this 'bank' of materials, schools and teachers could be invited to 'donate' videos and resources created for remote learning or 'flipped' lessons. These could be uploaded to a curated digital platform or, alternatively, links to materials as hosted in the public domain of schools' websites could be posted on AERO's, ACARA's and ESA's websites. The materials or links could be coded so that students and parents could easily find materials relating to specific portions of the Australian Curriculum. (The materials would need to meet copyright or other regulations and specifications.)

4. Supporting student wellbeing

Building the capacity of schools to support student wellbeing

There is evidence that the mental health and wellbeing of many students have suffered as a result of remote learning and isolation from peer interaction during COVID-19 lockdowns. AHISA welcomes the Australian Government's funding for student access to psychologists and counsellors through services such as headspace. There are also actions the Government can take to strengthen schools' capacity to support students.

- The [Australian Student Wellbeing Framework](#) serves as a useful guide to schools on the elements, principles and effective practices that should appear in a whole-of-school wellbeing framework. Education Services Australia (ESA) already offers resources for students, teachers and parents on its Student Wellbeing Hub. Given the diversity in Australian school communities, it would be helpful if schools were also able to access 'illustrations of practice' or other online resources to help guide implementation of the Framework and to prompt evaluation of current practices or the formation of new approaches. Such resources could help to more deeply embed the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework in school cultures.
- Teachers have adopted and developed new skills to observe, monitor and respond to the mental health of students during COVID-19 lockdowns and in response to the contribution of the pandemic more generally to rising levels of anxiety in children. To consolidate and refine these skills, the Australian Government could commission ESA or Child Family Communities Australia (a division of the Australian Institute of Family Studies) to develop short, credentialled online professional learning courses for teachers that are tailored to the classroom experience.
- AHISA commends the [National Code on Boarding School Students](#) developed in 2021 under the auspices of the Australian Government to support the travel needs of boarding school students – especially those crossing state or territory borders – during COVID-19 lockdowns. The re-opening of schools in 2022 has again exposed the challenges that boarding schools, and boarding students and their families face in the management of isolation of boarders in the case of COVID-19 infection and arrangements for boarders who are deemed close contacts. Recent reports of individual cases indicate that the mental health of students and their families is being affected by a lack of consistency in approaches by jurisdictions or delays in and even refusals of exemptions to COVID-19 restrictions. As Australia continues to manage COVID-19 as pandemic and epidemic, AHISA calls on the federal government to maintain pressure for a national approach to support families whose children attend boarding schools.

5. Strengthening all levels of school leadership

The disruption of schooling in 2020 and in subsequent COVID-19 lockdowns made evident not only the complexity of the work of teachers and teachers' professionalism, it revealed the importance of school leadership structures in effecting the fast 'pivots' to online delivery and in ensuring the ongoing health and wellbeing of both staff and students. In particular, it highlighted the role of the middle management tier of school leadership in implementing and embedding change.

Strengthening school leaders strengthens schools

- To help build leadership capacity in Australian schools, the Australian Government should task AITSL to undertake a rapid literature review of effective professional learning for middle and upper school management and to scope current professional learning options for Australian school leaders. These projects could support extension of the Australian Professional Teaching Standards and Australian Professional Standard for Principals to create a map of excellence in school leadership to support leadership progression and would also inform the creation of resources and/or short courses to support that progression.

6. Engaging parents in their children's education

Many parents gained new insights into their children's learning strengths and interests during periods of remote learning in 2020 and 2021. Fostering parental engagement with their children's learning supports student achievement.

Harnessing home support for school-based learning

- To strengthen parental engagement with their children's education, the Australian Government could commission a scoping study of programs and resources supporting parental engagement which are available nationally and within jurisdictions, both to identify gaps and to assist in developing new resources. For example, during COVID-19 lockdowns, schools developed resources for parents to gain IT skills, to demonstrate ways to contribute to their children's learning or to assist parents promote their children's physical activity and overall health and wellbeing. While some national online resources for parents are already available through ESA hubs, expansion of these and of resources for schools to encourage parental engagement would help strengthen students' home support for their school-based learning.

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