

Review of the National School Reform Agreement

Northern Territory Government submission

Introduction

The Northern Territory (NT) Government welcomes the opportunity to provide information to support the review and inform the approach to the future direction of national agreements.

For the purposes of the review, the Australian Government, in consultation with states and territories, has asked the Productivity Commission to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) and the appropriateness of the National Measurement Framework for Schooling in measuring progress towards achieving the outcomes of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

It also requested that the Commission make recommendations to inform the design of the next intergovernmental school reform agreement and to improve the Measurement Framework.

This submission provides broad feedback in response to the questions and points of interest that focuses on supporting the Productivity Commission to:

- (i) make its assessment as per the request, and
- (ii) provide recommendations to inform the design process for a new agreement, rather than identifying future policy direction.

NT Context

In the NT, approximately 34 000 students are enrolled in 153 government schools, spread across a vast and remote geographical area. Seventy-one per cent of schools, and 41 per cent of students, are located in remote or very remote areas. The NT has the highest proportion of Aboriginal students in Australia, at 39 per cent of its student population. Twenty-seven per cent of NT students receive disability adjustments¹ and 49 per cent of all students have a language background other than English². This context means our service delivery model differs greatly to that of other jurisdictions and is compounded due to the multidimensional needs of many Northern Territory children and students that are both within the school gate and outside the school gate.

It should also be acknowledged that the NT is starting from a different baseline position than other states and territories when it comes to educational outcomes. Our NAPLAN results consistently show that the percentage of NT students at or above the national minimum standard is well below the national average. A particular challenge for the NT in improving education outcomes is a lack of engagement, with many Aboriginal students disengaging from school for a variety of social and cultural reasons. Attendance rates for Aboriginal students average 63 per cent compared to 91 per cent for non-Aboriginal students.

¹ Report on Government Services 2022

² [Northern Territory Department of Education Annual Report 2020-21](#)

This flows through to school completion, with an apparent retention rate of 36 per cent for Aboriginal students from year 7 to year 12, compared to 75 per cent for non-Aboriginal students³.

Strategic direction and key drivers

To meet the broader needs of Northern Territory students, the NT Department of Education is investing in reforms that will have significant positive impact on the outcomes of children and students. The NT is on a journey to become the most improving education system in Australia and our renewed strategic direction is articulated in the [Education NT Strategy 2021–2025](#). This strategy is based on best practice and evidence, as well as extensive input from our children and students, families, communities, and our leaders and educators.

Through the Education NT Strategy, seven system priorities have been identified which place children and students' needs, interests and aspirations at the centre of our education system. These system priorities are recognised as the key drivers of student outcomes in the NT and, as a system, we are:

1. Strengthening instruction for young Territorians
2. Improving cultural responsiveness
3. Engaging every child and student in learning
4. Building the foundations for learning
5. Supporting successful transitions beyond schooling
6. Building an expert education workforce
7. Providing differentiated support for ECEC services, schools and communities.



Figure 1: Seven system priorities (Education NT Strategy 2021–2025, p.13)

³ Report on Government Services 2022

There are many drivers of student outcomes that fall outside the scope of the NSRA, however one key factor in determining future educational success is access to quality early childhood education and care. The Education NT Strategy acknowledges that children learn from birth, and that learning and development through all stages of schooling forms the foundation for the next stage. Children who receive quality early childhood education services from birth have a positive attitude to learning when they start school and are more resilient.

In recognition of the fundamental importance of student engagement in improving outcomes, and to address current engagement challenges in the NT, a ten-year [NT Education Engagement Strategy 2022-2031](#) has been developed.

Engagement in learning is critical for student success, and research tells us that there is a strong correlation between student engagement and students completing their schooling. However, students withdraw from learning when they are not engaged, and disengaged students will often remove themselves physically from the school. The costs of young people not engaging in learning are high, for the young person and for society. Young people who are disengaged from education are at higher risk of experiencing poverty, poor health, unemployment and incarceration and lacking voice to speak for themselves. Disengagement from education can contribute directly to intergenerational disadvantage.

Education has a role to play to support families and children and address any barriers raised by the school or system that may hinder a child or student to engage in learning. The focus of the NT Education Engagement Strategy is to identify and address these barriers.

The strategy recognises that the education system must reflect the rich cultural, social and linguistic diversity of our learners and their families in order to engage children and students in education services. A quality education empowers our young people and unlocks their full potential. For this to be realised, children and students must be motivated, challenged and see value in their education, feel safe and welcome in their learning environment, and have supportive and respectful relationships.

Four goals, with supporting actions, are being implemented as part of the strategy:

1. Education is a partnership - families and education services work together to ensure all children and young people get the best start to learning and they are supported and encouraged to continue their learning journey
2. The right people - positive, energetic, culturally responsive and skilled educators motivate children and young people to engage in learning and experience success.
3. Meaningful learning - Children participate regularly in early years programs, remain engaged through the stages of schooling and achieve success in their education.
4. Wellbeing and inclusion - Inclusive education supports the physical and mental wellbeing and diversity of all children and young people.

Place-based responses are key to improving outcomes in the NT

It is recognised that differentiated and tailored approaches are needed in every community, and building on local decision making is a key action that underpins all activity associated with the NT Education Engagement Strategy.

The challenges and barriers that both these strategies seek to address, particularly in relation to remote Aboriginal students, remain relatively consistent with those that existed prior to, and during, the life of the current NSRA. The way these are addressed from a policy design and implementation perspective in the

NT has moved towards more coordinated investment and place-based responses. Building, supporting and investing in strong local governance is necessary to ensure local people drive local solutions, and that Aboriginal organisations are supported in managing local decision making.

Key drivers of student outcomes in the NT will be significantly different to those in other contexts. The NT notes that the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) will play a critical role in leading evidence-based approaches in the future. For any initiative, notwithstanding the rigour and relevance of associated evidence, there must be the ability to implement with genuine engagement and partnership with Aboriginal people so that culturally responsive and place-based variations can occur.

Assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of the National Policy Initiatives

The NPIs are currently in varying stages of development and maturity, and have required significant time and investment from states, territories and the Commonwealth to keep them progressing. For a small jurisdiction like the NT, the number of NPIs and the level of activity required has spread resources very thin. In addition to the NPIs from the current NSRA, jurisdictions are still carrying the load of national work from previous intergovernmental agreements, such as NAPLAN Online, which has also been resource intensive. This is on top of the significant reform agenda that the NT is already undertaking. All of this has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to pivot resources to respond to the needs of schools.

This review provides the opportunity to reflect on progress to date and any lessons that can be learned, so that future agreed initiatives can succeed. For example, the delays in delivering some of the NPIs are reflective of the complexity involved in designing approaches or systems that are appropriate for the context of every jurisdiction. This highlights the need for sufficient lead time to agree and implement major reforms nationally, often involving new and complex ICT systems, so that contextual need and differing priorities of each jurisdiction can be appropriately considered. This may also allow opportunity to consider what already exists, or is in development, in other jurisdictions that can be leveraged for national benefit.

For the NT, national effort must focus on the right reforms. As a small jurisdiction, the NT does not have the economies of scale to implement many of the initiatives alone and has limited capacity to invest in significant improvement projects on par with other states and territories. For example, initiatives such as the Online Formative Assessment Initiative could not be achieved locally without national collaboration.

Moving forward, fewer reforms with a shared vision, genuine commitment and a clear and shared value proposition is critical to ensuring NPIs are delivered in an effective and timely manner. Additionally, any future iteration of the NSRA will need to acknowledge the continued efforts required for the current NPIs, as many are still in the early stages of implementation (e.g. Online Formative Assessment Initiative and the Unique Student Identifier). This will continue to require resourcing and focus past the life of the current NSRA, noting outcomes will not be seen for many years.

National collaboration offers considerable opportunities to improve education delivery in the NT, however it is important that there is a common strategic vision and sufficient lead time for collaborative effort.

Agreeing clear principles that would guide decisions on how reforms are identified, would benefit both local and national efforts by ensuring clear benefit from the outset.

Guiding principles

Section 43 of the NSRA sets out the principles for the NPIs as part of the three agreed reform directions.

43. The reform directions will be progressed nationally through national policy initiatives that:

- a) recognise and build on existing national, State and Territory and sectoral reform activities that are proven to be lifting outcomes for students*
- b) have a robust and evidence-based rationale for how national policy initiatives will directly or indirectly improve outcomes through national coordinated effort*
- c) concentrate reform efforts on the key enablers that drive improvement in educational outcomes*
- d) take into account jurisdictional and sectoral context and allow for jurisdictional and sectoral flexibility in implementation of national policy initiatives, including in resource allocation.*

These principles remain relevant with the addition that NPIs should also concentrate on areas where there are genuine opportunities for, and benefit from, national collaboration. All NPIs should have a clearly articulated value proposition with agreed outcomes and program logic.

Through its review, it is appropriate that the Productivity Commission considers the process for which any new national priority initiatives are designed, rather than seek to identify actual policy priorities for a new agreement. The existing section 43 principles should be utilised as a basis for policy design, with consideration given to advice received through the Call for Submissions for any additional principles.

In terms of the types of policy areas that are best suited to national collaboration, these would be where there is:

- a common, and national, problem to solve
- efficiency to be achieved, i.e. can the issue be solved more quickly together and with greater effectiveness
- the opportunity to learn and work together.

External factors influencing the effectiveness of NPIs

There are a number of factors that could better support, or enhance, the effectiveness of any national initiatives that sit outside the responsibility of education authorities but are within the broader remit or influence of the Australian Government.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

The way education is delivered is changing, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Flexible education delivery is becoming an increasing and critical part of the education system and has the potential to provide more equitable access to education for students in remote locations. However, ICT accessibility and connectivity continues to be a barrier for those jurisdictions who deliver education to regional and remote students. A focus on enabling ICT infrastructure would provide the same opportunities for students regardless of where they live and would support more effective delivery of current and future NPIs. Given the current connectivity issues in the NT, any future NPI that requires a technical solution must have at least a no or low bandwidth options to ensure equity for NT students.

Workforce Challenges

While it is noted that the issue of teacher quality is one area the Australian Government has taken action with the recent Quality Initial Teacher Education review, alleviating workforce shortages is of equal importance. There are limitations to the attraction and retention initiatives states and territories can offer.

The Australian Government can directly influence the supply of teachers from overseas through for example, prioritising and increasing student visas for those studying teaching as well as working visas for those with a teaching qualification.

Measurement Framework and performance indicators

It is important to have a national mechanism that captures, measures, analyses and compares state and territory data to inform a range of audiences. This is being currently achieved through the National Measurement Framework and the National Report on Schooling. The consistent collection of data improves, and will continue to improve, the national evidence base and inform policy development.

It should be noted that jurisdictions have their own mechanisms in place to monitor performance, based on their strategic improvement priorities. For the NT, a set of Headline Improvement Measures have been developed alongside the Education NT Strategy 2021-25. National measurement should be streamlined and allow for supplementary differentiation at the state or territory level.

The current National Measurement Framework represents existing measures. However, a long-term vision for the framework should be considered based on what would be the best possible evidence-based measures to monitor system performance, rather than the current collation of existing measures. Any framework design should be student-centric, with the goal of providing the best opportunity for meaningful and relevant information that can impact practice.

It should also be acknowledged that education outcomes are intrinsically linked to a range of social factors and variables. In the NT, there are high numbers of students who experience significant social disadvantage which impact education outcomes, and in turn, caution should be taken when using the current NMF data in isolation to guide national policy and report achievement.

Conclusion

The NT welcomes this opportunity to support the Productivity Commission's review and to inform the design process for the next national agreement.

While the NT has a unique delivery context with distinct challenges, there is opportunity for greater national collaboration, particularly for priority equity cohorts so long as an evidence-based and context-driven approach can be taken. To improve educational outcomes for remote Aboriginal people, it is important that community are engaged as partners and local decision-making is built upon for place-based and coordinated approaches.