

16 June 2022

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

Review of the National School Reform Agreement

The Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission on the National School Reform Agreement.

The Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) is the national professional association for public primary school principals in Australia. AGPPA represents over 5300 principals in public primary schools in every corner of every state and territory. It is worth noting that this body is representative of over half of all schools in Australia – inclusive of all Primary, Secondary, Catholic and Independent schools across the country.

AGPPA's National Council includes representatives from six states and two territories, with two members representing each jurisdiction. This group represents a shared national commitment to both highlight the importance of the primary years and to promote excellence in public primary education in Australia. Our advocacy is based on the vision of every child attending a school with healthy, high-performing leaders and quality staff, along with the knowledge that primary schools are where Australian children acquire the necessary foundational academic, social and emotional skills to lead fulfilled and enriched lives. It is imperative that our education policy enables this noble intent so that all children can experience such success, both at school and through later life.

AGPPA initiatives, actions and projects are research informed and aim to assist in making Australia's education system a beacon for all. This aim is perhaps best enunciated using the words of David Gonski, Chair of the Review of Funding for Schooling expert panel, who said:

"Every child should have access to the best possible education, regardless of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend."

Just as importantly, Dr Philip Riley (Chief Investigator of the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Surveys) reminds us:

"Today's children are tomorrow's nation builders. We owe it to them and ourselves to give them the best opportunities we can."

Our submission is based upon the professional opinions and experiences of public primary school leaders, AGPPA position papers, reports and research projects undertaken on behalf of AGPPA. AGPPA believes strongly in having a high quality and high equitable education system, consistent with the overall objective of the National Schools Reform Agreement. We feel, strongly, however, that the current Agreement fails to properly recognise and provide for such in our government primary schools around Australia and seek to positively influence the new agreement to be drafted in 2023.

AGPPA has articulated in its Strategic Plan, the following:

- Positively impact the education agenda for primary educators in Australian Government Schools.
- Promote the profession of teaching and school leadership, and government education;
- Advocate on behalf of state/territory government primary principals and students;
- Formulate appropriate position statements and position documents relating to states/territories government primary education and communicate to the wider education community.
- Provide a structure for the exchange of ideas and initiatives relevant to state/territory government primary education;
- Network with other organisations and individuals sharing a commitment to state/ territory government primary education.

Consistent with our overall strategic directions, in the lead up to the recent Federal Election, AGPPA proactively called for the incoming Federal Government to:

- Have regular consultation with AGPPA in an honest, open, willing and timely manner.
- Identify and resource the support that enhances school leader wellbeing.
- Increase funding for every primary student, so that the SRS for every Australian student is the same.
- Ensure that all students in Australian government primary schools receive a minimum of 100% of the SRS.
- Ensure that state and territory education departments utilise the NCCD data to deliver the full allocation of resourcing to schools for students with complex and additional needs.
- Work with states and territories to ensure that government primary schools are fit for purpose to deliver the contemporary Australian Curriculum in full.

It is no coincidence that The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration also prioritises an education system that promotes excellence and equity, and supports all young Australians to become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community. AGPPA feels that the current National School Reform Agreement fails to deliver, especially for our government primary school students.

Drivers of Student Outcomes

AGPPA believes that the National School Reform Agreement has too much focus on “end results” such as Year 12 attainment without the recognition that for students to attain Year 12 qualifications, they first need to be engaged and successful students in the primary years. Whilst we agree that this is a worthy overall objective, we feel that first, we need to see all of our Year 6 students with “*eyes shining*”, wanting to attend school, feeling valued, achieving and ready to take on the many wonderful opportunities our secondary schools have to offer. To do so, our government primary schools require appropriate resourcing and recognition from their respective State Governments as well as the Federal Government. Across Australia we are seeing too many of our students not completing primary school in this situation and this is significantly apparent for our Aboriginal students and students with disabilities (approx. 80% attending Government schools). This is not to say that our primary schools are not doing a “good job”, but underpins the lack of importance placed on the primary sector, especially in government schools and this is highlighted by two key resourcing factors:

- Primary SRS being significantly lower than secondary (over \$3100 differential)
- Funding to Government schools being limited to less than 95% of the SRS

We need to recognise the special opportunity that primary schools can provide for students to succeed to become successful young Australians, but this is not driven purely by “high stakes testing” such as NAPLAN.

Over the past two years, with many schools being impacted by COVID, it has been our primary schools which have found it most difficult, especially in lower socioeconomic areas where access to technology was limited. Continuity of learning was extremely challenging for our primary teachers and this further highlighted the funding gap between primary and secondary.

Primary school teaching is a highly specialised profession as teachers are required to have knowledge of all learning areas, whilst supporting the social and emotional development of each individual student. These are the critical formation years for students and we would argue that more needs to be done to ensure that leaders, teachers and schools are properly equipped to do this important work. In addition, Government Primary Schools are one of the only Government Departments in many towns across Australia and are seen as the bed rock of many of these communities. Issues associated with staffing, housing and isolation further impinges on their ability to provide the best for all children in Australia.

While the audience for the National School Reform Agreement remains the wider education community, including Schools, Education Departments and State and Federal Governments, successful enactment of the intent of this agreement and future such agreements requires an empowering of principals, teachers and school communities. This can only occur if the current focus on drivers such as external accountability characterised by high stakes testing is replaced by more appropriate measures which measure the impact of schooling on students that reflects the values and aspirations of Australia, not the United States. After 10 years of NAPLAN as a critical driver, it is obvious that this has not worked.

This sentiment is echoed by educational experts like Pasi Sahlberg who has regularly commented on the focus on national testing in many jurisdictions around the world. He laments that what is most worrying: *'is the shift of teachers' and students' attention from teaching and learning for understanding towards being successful in high stake tests and exams'*.

The importance of teachers in the learning process is well acknowledged as a critical driver of

Despite this critical importance, Professor Donna Cross from the University of Western Australia indicates that *'Teachers report the highest level of occupational stress in Australia, the United Kingdom and America'*, when compared to other occupations.

Key issues contributing to these concerns included:

- *excessive workload and working hours*
- *poor student behaviour including lack of motivation and effort, disrespect, violence, challenging authority*
- *management of bullying, and reactive management strategies*
- *aggression from pupils and parents*
- *classroom and school climate*

Wellbeing at the school level is also adversely affected by the propensity of governments and bureaucracies to impose additional responsibilities on schools without considering what else should be removed to make space for the added expectations. This has been exacerbated even further in recent years by an overcrowded primary curriculum.

National Policy Initiatives

The measures identified in the National Assessment Program prioritise academic performance (NAPLAN) and fail to recognise the fundamental element of engagement. This has resulted in us seeing a “pushing down” of the curriculum, at the exclusion of quality pedagogy which recognises the age and ability of our primary school age children.

The national requirement to report on all learning areas in all year levels with a five point scale (A – E) is a secondary model and not consistent, nor conducive, to ensuring that our junior school students, in particular, are highly engaged and motivated. Outside of English and Mathematics, junior primary teachers struggle with this reporting requirement, and whilst outside the scope of this review, it is something which AGPPA feels needs to be addressed at the national level by all State Education Ministers.

As Professor Alan Reid states in *Building our Nation Through Public Education: AGPPA 2016*

'If the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians is to be taken seriously, then the public purpose goals it sets out should be used as the benchmark for assessment. The sorts of questions that might be asked of policies, programs and practices would relate to the extent to which they contribute to the wider social good or community benefit. These would include consideration about whether they:

- *Help to develop capacities for democratic participation*
- *Contribute to the health of the whole system*
- *Include rather than exclude*
- *Support a quality education for all*
- *Promote a culture of collaboration*
- *Model democratic decision-making*

He also adds:

'...the government needs to make the Melbourne Goals the touchstone for its policy making, rather than consigning it to the margins'.

Likewise, we would argue that the Mparntwe goals are firmly in the sights of decision makers in framing the next National School Reform Agreement.

Given that the new National Schools Reform Agreement will be the basis for future Bilateral Agreements with States, AGPPA looks forward to involvement in the ongoing discussion and further consultation relating to this very important review.

Kind regards,

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President

Australian Government Primary Principals Association.

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Attachments:

- AGPPA Response to Melbourne Declaration Review
- AGPPA Response to Review of Senior Secondary Pathways
- AGPPA Response to Improving Occupational Mobility - Teachers
- AGPPA Response to National Architecture Reforms Consultations

