



PREMIER OF TASMANIA

19 NOV 2022

Mr Michael Brennan
National School Reform Agreement
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins St East
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

Dear Mr Brennan

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Productivity Commission's review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) interim report.

The Tasmanian Government noted in its initial submission to the review that the Commission's approach to the review, as outlined in the Calls for Submission paper and the interim report's seventeen information requests, is far broader than the scope agreed to by Education Ministers in early 2022, which includes:

- The effectiveness and appropriateness of the National Policy Initiatives (NPIs); and
- The appropriateness of the Measurement Framework in measuring progress towards achieving the outcomes of the NSRA.

Our Government notes the interim report is similarly broad in nature. The interim report makes several information requests to assist the Commission in developing its final report, however providing the breadth and scope of information being requested represents a significant and resource-intensive task for a small jurisdiction to prepare in the time allowed. Tasmania will therefore again use this submission to highlight its specific education context and respond to particular areas of focus for national reform efforts.

Tasmania's educational context is challenged by high proportions of disadvantage in comparison to other jurisdictions,¹ and significant concentrations of disadvantage with the majority of Tasmania's most disadvantaged students in our government schools. Research has shown a direct correlation between socio-economic status and the education outcomes of learners,² and this has been backed up by NAPLAN data. This has seriously impacted the outcomes of Tasmanian learners with lower levels of attendance, achievement and attainment that is statistically significantly different to the national standard. Ultimately, entrenched disadvantage is the major barrier to positive learner outcomes in Tasmania.

¹ 2033.0.55.001 - Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2016.

² S Lamb et al, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: who succeeds and who misses out (2020)*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University.

Our Government is fully committed to closing this gap and ensuring more equitable outcomes for our learners. We are addressing this through whole-of-government initiatives such as the *Community-Wide Framework for Literacy in Tasmania*. School-based supports include additional teachers, teacher assistants, social workers, speech and language pathologists, additional literacy and numeracy supports and higher levels of financial assistance to families, however this naturally creates increased costs to service delivery. Therefore, our Government would be supportive of the next schools agreement having increased flexibility in funding arrangements, in recognition of the increased costs for service delivery and diverse challenges faced by jurisdictions.

The Department for Education, Children and Young People has a goal of access, participation, and engagement for our learners. We are committed to ensuring Tasmanian learners are actively participating in their learning and aspiring to pursue life opportunities facilitated by a culture of accepting challenges, embracing opportunities and continuous improvement.

While our Government acknowledges the interim report's findings on stagnating levels of student outcomes, the report minimises important contextual information that has existed for the majority of the current NSRA. Schools, like the broader community, have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020. This has caused widespread and ongoing disruptions to learners engaging with their education, such as requirements to learn remotely and limited face-to-face contact with their peers and teachers.

It is important to recognise the disruptions the pandemic has caused for three of the four years the NSRA has been in effect. The NSRA should not be considered in isolation and measuring the success of the agreement in addressing learner outcomes has been significantly impacted by external factors. While it is too early to understand the full impact of the pandemic on learner outcomes such as literacy and numeracy, we do have evidence in the early years and in wellbeing data that learners have been impacted.

Due to Tasmania's small size and resource-constrained environment, we face challenges in supporting learners that have fallen behind, which underlines the importance of national collaboration. The disruptions and rapidly changing situation due to the pandemic impacted the ability of all governments to fully progress and support national work that was underway that would provide targeted support for cohorts of learners. This has created a gap whereby systems are only now catching up in supporting learners that are struggling as we transition to a COVID normal environment. In the initial years of the pandemic, systems prioritised learners being safe, well and attending school. Efforts should now focus on targeted curriculum delivery for specific cohorts to ensure growth in outcomes for all learners.

Our Government strongly values the benefits of national collaboration in addressing challenges in education. As a smaller jurisdiction, Tasmania operates in a resource-constrained environment and has limited capacity to develop and implement significant projects on its own. Through the NSRA, Tasmania has been able to work collaboratively with the Australian Government and other States and Territories to undertake major pieces of work that require collective expertise and resources, particularly large technical projects.

To identify NPIs that should be part of a national agreement, Governments should agree to work to a set of unifying foundational principles to ensure that NPIs are purposeful and set up for ongoing success. They should be:

- Valued nationally;
- Evidence informed;
- Key enablers of improvement;
- Mutually cooperative;
- Flexible and sustainable; and
- Supportive.

The process of designing and implementing NPIs is integral to their success. Any work agreed to should be mutually beneficial across jurisdictions and sectors, while also recognising that it is the responsibility of States and Territories to deliver education that aligns with their local context and acknowledging key differences that may exist between them.

As our Government noted in its initial submission to the review, NPIs require significant resources and time to implement, with the effects of nationally coordinated reform efforts needing time to materialise. Because of this, our Government would be supportive of the next agreement featuring fewer NPIs than the current agreement (of which there are eight), but which are highly valued, highly targeted and informed by evidence. This would be more facilitative of meaningful reform by allowing jurisdictions to concentrate efforts rather than risk being spread too thin, particularly in resource-constrained environments – including through effective partnerships with the non-government sector. What reforms are considered highly valuable and appropriately targeted by all jurisdictions would be a matter for Ministers to agree following negotiations by officials across a range of fora throughout 2023.

Additionally, national work should leverage or create linkages to work that is underway at a jurisdictional level, ensuring that it is supportive, adds value and avoids duplication. For example, introducing wellbeing into the next agreement will need to factor in Tasmania's prioritisation of, and approach to, student wellbeing that is articulated in the Tasmanian Government's *Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy*. This strategy has been developed with the Tasmanian context at the forefront, such as embedding wellbeing in school improvement planning.

To this end, our Government welcomes the report's focus on student wellbeing. Performance is not just about achievement and attainment – wellbeing is a crucial precondition that lays the groundwork for the improvement of a young person's life and the effectiveness of their education. Tasmania notes the findings of the report that many students experience poor wellbeing but are not receiving effective support. In addressing this at the state level as a matter of priority, our Government is implementing a comprehensive range of initiatives to understand and support student wellbeing that are consistent with whole-of-government initiatives and strategies such as the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, as well as the *Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey*, Student Voice Focus Groups and more.

Avoiding duplication is also critical to how the new agreement interacts with other national work that is ongoing. Our Government acknowledges the findings in the interim report on teacher workforce, particularly workforce shortages and the benefits of improving teacher effectiveness and workloads. Our teaching workforce has shown remarkable resilience and commitment to providing quality education through the challenges of the pandemic.

However, the issues identified within the report are already being addressed through the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan*. The Action Plan is bringing Governments, the non-government sector and other education stakeholders together to work collaboratively on solutions for workforce challenges. Incorporating workforce issues as a new NPI into a new agreement risks duplicating or overriding the existing work being undertaken.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide further comment on the review of the NSRA. The Tasmanian Government looks forward to receiving the final report in December. This will help with the development of a new schools agreement that continues the shared national goal of providing a quality equitable education for all.

Yours sincerely

 Jeremy Rockliff MP

Premier