

Submission from the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

Review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)

June, 2022

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An NSRA for Reform

The NSRA can be a tool for reform. In this submission, the Australian Primary Principals Association sets out an agenda which can invigorate and stimulate education and improve outcomes. We want to develop partnerships with governments which we are confident will create an environment where education can flourish, where creativity can thrive and children are nurtured. It is not a quick fix, but it is an attempt to acknowledge the lived experience of educators, researchers and policy developers, ***working together***.

The current NSRA fails to consider the needs of schools. It is a document which ***does to*** people without a mechanism to ***work with*** those impacted by the established priorities. APPA contends the current NSRA is well intended but wrong in its approach. It draws on traditions of governments rightly focussing on results-based accountability, but losing their way in stipulating far too many accountability metrics. Instead of creating flourishing organisations, this results in mediocrity, in a measurement induced mire, as schools struggle to respond to all of the 'bits', while missing the magnificence of the sunset.¹

APPA calls for the next NSRA to be a catalyst for real school reform. What does it look like for governments to enter into a National Reform Agreement which is focussed on a new way of working, which harnesses the energy of professionals working in the area to achieve mutually desired results? What it shouldn't be, is more of the same, of more and more measuring in the hope that results come from increased micromanagement and falsely premised accountability. School-based personnel feel confined by a morass of measurement which kills initiative and creativity. Which inhibits schools responding individually, community by community, to pressing local needs.

A total rethink of educational policy is needed. Schools are well versed in using evidence-based research to support changing practice but Australian educational indicators are not showing improvement. It is time we insist that evidence-based policy settings are also adopted. Where is the evidence that policy settings such as those established in the current NSRA are effective and resulting in the agreed outcomes? Let us show courage and conviction and work together to make a difference. The victims of inaction, are Australian children, in particular those who are the most vulnerable.

¹ Whitehead, A. N. (1926). When you ***understand all about the sun and all about the atmosphere and all about the rotation of the earth***, you may ***still miss the radiance of the sunset***.

APPA's Five Step Agenda for Reform

APPA's submission focuses on changes which provide opportunities to review and reimagine the future of education in this country. APPA is calling for the establishment of respectful, professional partnerships which enhance educational opportunities for children. Underpinning this agenda are five principles for action:

1. *The need for policy development input from schools*
2. *Equality*
3. *Interagency and NGO coordination.*
4. *Accountability –*
 - a. *Establishment of a manageable matrix of measures to assess the health of the whole system*
 - b. *National testing to focus on system performance, not that of the child.*
5. *A New Primary Curriculum.*

Step One. The need for policy development input from schools

APPA calls on governments to establish a mechanism to work with schools and school jurisdictions in developing policy and assessing policy impacts.

Schools need input into decisions that impact them. While it is recognised that Governments set policy agendas, those policy agendas can and should be enriched by a school perspective. Working with schools in the continuing refinement of policy propositions (Stenhouse, 1975), enhances policy outcomes. Working with schools to assess the practicality of policy propositions creates a mutually respectful partnership and an increased likelihood of policy implementation success. Such an approach allows for greater responsiveness in better meeting the needs of children and should lessen the intensification of work demands on principals and school staff.

In recent years, the intensification of the work-load for principals and teachers has been cruel – probably unintentionally so, but cruel nonetheless. And it highlights the need for a reformation in how policy development and enactment occur. Policy makers must consider any policy proposition from the perspective of schools – and that perspective is of the school as a whole, not the perspective of the multiple competing demands of numerous silos. When the bureaucracy is organised in silos, each of which transmits their edicts to schools without the crucial test of practicality, this adds to the intensification of work for school practitioners. Principals should not be put under the additional pressure of balancing the often contradictory and competing demands of the silos, to make them work in practice.

Serious school reform needs to look at structuring a school/bureaucracy interface which works – an interface premised on working with schools in developing ***workable policy positions***.



Step Two. Equality

APPA calls for genuine needs-based, sector-blind resourcing. This is essential for school leaders to effectively differentiate support to ensure success for all. APPA acknowledges the commitment to equalise needs-based funding across all sectors by 2029.

A focus on equality leads to excellence and yet, while Australia is recognised as having an excellent education system, it is not excellent for everyone. Many international organisations, including UNICEF and the OECD, rate Australian education as unequal and highly segregated, leaving too many children behind (Sahlberg, 2022).

Social disadvantage is a well-documented factor strongly linked to poorer outcomes for children. The most recent *Dropping Off the Edge* report (Tanton et al, 2021) highlights the particularly strong link between intergenerational poverty and low educational attainment. The report complements other recent studies based on OECD data showing Australia to be near the bottom of OECD rankings in the treatment of disadvantaged members of our society. While Australia does very well in overall measures, we do relatively less well in caring for the most disadvantaged members of our community.

The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, charges educators with ‘supporting every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face’ (Council of Australian Governments Education, 2019. p.2). But such statements have been made with regularity (see The Hobart Declaration, 1989; The Adelaide Declaration, 1999; The Melbourne Declaration, 2008). While it is accepted these declarations are sincere and well intentioned, they have traditionally been translated into an increased emphasis on measurement and control – with little or no improvement in educational performance over that time.

APPA calls for funding to facilitate an education of the highest quality for every student, in every locale and for funding to be targeted to those students who need it most.

Step Three. Remove the silos and focus on the whole child

The NSRA focus is on improving schools. But to be a true mechanism for reform, the NSRA must extend beyond schools, to the myriad of agencies and services children and their families have to deal with. Performance targets have been shown to be effective at improving performance in a variety of contexts; however, they are also criticized for promoting siloed working and discouraging cooperation with others. Helping others often doesn’t help achieve an agency’s own targets, and agencies respond by turning inward. (Scott and Boyd, 2017, Scott and Merton, 2022). We need to redirect this.

Flourishing schools require flourishing communities. If we want true school reform, we must have coherent, joined up services that work with children and families in need. There are many local and international examples of this occurring but all are limited in scale.



True school reform is part of true community reform. And systematising a focus on joined up services, oriented to local communities, is a good place to start.

Responses to disadvantage are generally fragmented. There are too many uncoordinated service providers, none of which individually have the capacity to provide the level of service needed by some children and their families. Fractionated, uncoordinated service provision does not meet the needs of families. Too many times, principals have presided over coordination meetings of service providers, sometimes involving 25 representatives, all of whom can attend a meeting to talk about the needs, but none of whom seem able to respond to those needs!

The many resources available across agencies and NGOs, must change from the current ethos of scarcity and 'passing the funding buck' to one of providing service. Patch based services are premised on the view that families in need are more easily identified locally than on a larger area scale. The more locally we can place services staff, the more quickly we can provide early intervention and proactive service supports. Combining resources across agencies in supporting people in local areas (patches) is a significant strategy we should explicitly pursue. And many of the 'patches' of high disadvantage are already well known (see for example, the *Dropping Off The Edge* report – Tanton et al, 2021).

A child's world doesn't consist of separate entities such as siloed government agencies, social welfare systems, voluntary organisations, family and friends. To be successful in creating supportive communities we need a generous, connected community, with local government, other agencies and NGOs focussed on providing interconnected, seamless services to children and their families. A great learning environment is insufficient if a child is fearful, neglected or abused. It is difficult to engage in learning if you are concerned for the welfare of your mother; if you are hungry; if you are afraid. For this reason, schools are more likely to be 'great' when we have great communities. It is not enough to consider our policy responses in siloed, isolation.

We need to break away from the Westminster silos that constrain us and rethink our service delivery models in ways that are coordinated and work. APPA advocates for an urgent rethink of service provision **across all agencies**, as part of the NSRA.

Step Four. Accountability:

a): A matrix of measures to assess the health of the whole system.

It is entirely appropriate that we have measures of our efficacy as an education system. Nobody wants to hide from this. APPA contends we need **a limited, manageable set, of education indicators** to measure the educational performance of jurisdictions and provide guidance for improvement. This set of data should be **focussed on the performance of the system, not the child**. The development of the child is the core business of schools and is a continuous process of targeted teaching coupled with appropriate continuous assessment. This should not be confused with the assessment of jurisdiction performance.



APPA calls for the development of a manageable set of indicators measuring the welfare of children in their communities – a ‘health of system’ matrix. A **health of system indicator matrix** can be a means by which *all agencies* assess performance in terms of their *interdependent overall service* provided to children.

Collaboration between service-providers both inside and outside government is the key public administration challenge that must be solved to address our most complex problems (Scott and Merton, 2022). And the collaboration needs to be seamless, perhaps focussed on the delivery of services in locally identified ‘patches’.

The adoption of a matrix of indicators recognises that each indicator is in fact ‘acted upon’ or influenced by actions taken under a number of initiatives. For example, an indicator such as *attendance rates at school* is influenced by a complex array of factors often requiring several groups working together to support the child and their family. Improvements in attendance come through engaging teaching, an interesting and relevant curriculum, good supports for the family so children are nourished and can sleep safely, and so on... Improvements in attendance may have little to do with specific attendance programs, but rather come from a set of interlinked actions which collectively create an environment for improvements to be achieved.

Goodhart and others argue that "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure" (Chrystal & Mizen, 2001, Muller, J., 2018), meaning a ‘target’ can take us down the path of short-term, secondary solutions rather than actions to address the heart of the identified issue. In the case of well-intentioned attendance targets, this can result in secondary ‘solutions’ such as phone home truancy programs or advertising programs highlighting the importance of attendance, rather than an array of programs designed to create the conditions for better school engagement and healthy communities.

b): National testing to focus on system performance, not that of the child.

Student performance data is important but this doesn’t need to be harvested through high stakes national testing of all students. Instead, statistically significant data can be productively collected through sample testing. In recent years, NAPLAN has become increasingly high-stakes in response to accountability expectations however the gains have been less than encouraging (QASSP, 2020).

Australia’s declining performance in PISA comparisons has also been interpreted as a concerning data set (Thomson et al., 2019). In the United States, five decades of standardised data have resulted in little improvement (Hanushek, 2016). The evidence indicates that since the mid-1980s, developing educator capability through external accountability measures has not achieved the desired results (Hattie, 2015; Munby & Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).



APPA argues the best way to enhance educational outcomes is to create conditions where students can flourish. We want to create a space where children can be joyful learners. And we want good data that leads us to improve educational outcomes and the lives of children. It is time to rethink an 'all-in' testing approach and return to sample-testing to assess the performance of jurisdictions.

Step Five. A New Primary Curriculum

APPA calls for the development of a primary curriculum reflective of how children learn and which encourages responsiveness and adaptability for teachers in meeting needs. The current primary and early childhood curriculum is too crowded, impossible to teach if taken literally, and is based on outdated models of curriculum, steeped in coverage.

A new story of primary curriculum is needed. We call for a coherent curriculum which celebrates children and their curiosity, which encourages diversity and a diverse conception of skills and knowledge. A curriculum which addresses the 'basics' while creating space for each learner's potential to be unleashed.

Where is the primary curriculum based upon an understanding of how children learn? Where is the space for play, for wonder? Our current curriculum is dominated by a tertiary conception of faculties, pushed down into learning areas and translated as content to be mastered. There is a focus on division, grades, and subjects, in a world that is based on collaboration and synergy. In their 2014 Review of the Australian Curriculum, Donnelly & Wiltshire noted the development of the curriculum documents *"should have begun with school and classroom practice realities, especially in primary school and particularly in the early years."* APPA agrees and has consistently called for the development of a less crowded, manageable curriculum (APPA, 2014).

We call for a rethink of the primary and early childhood curriculum. A curriculum which is coherent and makes sense to teachers and students. A concise curriculum which recognises and builds on the expertise of teachers.

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