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Review of the National School Reform Agreement

The NSW Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's *Review of the National School Reform Agreement – Interim Report*.

The SPC is the professional association representing approximately 500 Principals of government schools in NSW that have secondary school enrolments. The Council works closely with senior officials from the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Minister for Education and Early Learning and provides advice on matters relating to public secondary education.

The following views and recommendations are offered on behalf of the association as being critical to improving student outcomes.

Classroom Practice

Quality Teaching Rounds

The Quality Teaching Framework, based on the work of Professor James Ladwig and Professor Jenny Gore and the subsequent Quality Teaching Rounds, is a research-based practice of professional observation to improve lesson quality based on feedback from peers.¹ It provides a mechanism for improving teacher practice within a clear framework and is increasingly accepted by teachers and school leaders as being an effective method for refining practice and informing the professional learning needs of teachers.

Lesson observation to improve and observe practice in this manner could be an effective way to improve student outcomes whilst respecting the professional judgement of teachers. It must be clearly distinguished from lesson observation to assess performance.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge

The pervasive achievement gap for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is a clear indicator that cultural and community perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge are not sufficiently incorporated into current practice.

Ongoing consultation with local communities and peak organisations must be a feature of any efforts to close this equity gap, along with an appropriate allocation of fiscal, human and physical resources.

Significant efforts must also be made to improve the cultural competence of school staff to reflect the particular needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families.

A recent study by the Gonski Institute (UNSW) clearly demonstrated the capacity to improve the performance of Aboriginal students in NAPLAN-style assessments by modifying the content of the questions and stimulus

¹ *Quality Teaching Rounds* was originally developed by Professor Gore and Dr Julie Bowe in 2007. See: J. Gore, 'The quest for better teaching', (2021) *Oxford Review of Education* 47 45.



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materials to be more closely relevant to their cultural context.² Efforts must be made to reduce or eliminate cultural bias in curriculum content and assessment tools.

It is also clear to experienced educators that the responsibility for addressing the achievement gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait students lies not only with education, but also with a range of other government and non-government agencies. A more holistic, whole of government approach to addressing a range of underlying social issues is fundamental to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The same applies to other cohorts of disadvantaged students.

Improving teacher quality: Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

There needs to be a coordinated approach to entry requirements for ITE courses. In recent years, we have seen multiple reviews and different jurisdictions imposing additional requirements on those undertaking ITE. These include:

- the requirement, in NSW to attain Band 5 results in the HSC, including English
- the introduction of LANTITE assessments as a requisite for successful completion of an ITE course
- the requirement for students to achieve a minimum credit average
- the introduction of Teaching Performance Assessments to confirm proficiency in classroom practice.

There have also been several deliberate efforts to attract additional enrolments into ITE courses through scholarships such as Teach.NSW.

These practices, along with calls for minimum ATAR requirements, aim to improve the quality of those entering ITE courses. However, these increased expectations are not matched by a corresponding respect for the profession. We cannot aspire to attract ‘the best and brightest’ to the profession when working conditions, community respect (as articulated in the media and by political leaders) and top of the scale salaries do not match that of other professions with similar academic qualifications.

In some jurisdictions, ITE providers have also been required to incorporate particular elements into their courses in addition to core discipline/curriculum content and pedagogical theory and practice. These elements include: Aboriginal perspectives, classroom management and inclusive education principles. These additions meet a need and may be warranted, but the ad hoc nature of implementation undermines a nationally consistent approach.

Many secondary teachers also enter the profession without an adequate understanding of language conventions. Even secondary English teachers are likely to have studied an English literature course, rather than an English grammar course, as part of their ITE degree. This is particularly the case where students have completed an undergraduate degree (e.g., Bachelor of Arts or similar) and are undertaking teaching as a postgraduate qualification. These literature courses typically do not explicitly teach language conventions. Some ITE providers have expressed the view that it is not their role to teach language conventions to their ITE students as this should be done at school. Teachers, at the same time, express their lack of confidence in teaching language conventions to secondary students because of their lack of knowledge. This cyclic argument does nothing to advance the literacy skills of students in our school and must be addressed. Ensuring that ITE students undertaking K-6 teaching degrees have a high level of literacy and numeracy content and methodology embedded in their degree is essential. Similarly, whilst all secondary teachers should have more than a basic competency in both literacy and numeracy, teachers of secondary English must have high levels of proficiency in language conventions. This should be an explicit component of their teaching qualifications.

The increase in expectations of ITE students has also corresponded with an ‘upgrading’ of their qualification from an initial undergraduate degree with a graduate diploma of education to a Masters in Teaching. The SPC is concerned by recent calls to return to the graduate diploma model as an expedient response to the current teacher shortage that has inherent risk. Whilst the graduate diploma was an appropriate qualification in previous years, the

² R. Wilson, A. Piccoli, A. Hargreaves, P. T Ng, & P. Sahlberg, ‘Putting Students First: Moving on from NAPLAN to a new educational assessment system’ (2021), *The Gonski Institute Policy Paper 2*.

complexity of teaching has increased and the Masters in Teaching is now a more appropriate and relevant qualification which reflects the interrelationship between content knowledge and pedagogical understanding.

There remains much variation across ITE providers in the ways in which the aforementioned elements have been implemented. For example, the number and variation of TPAs remains problematic. Many ITE providers have entered into consortia arrangements, which has the potential benefit of enhancing consistency of judgement, whilst others continue to develop their own models, potentially undermining consistency of judgement. A nationally consistent approach with a deliberate aim of reducing variation may result in higher levels of consistency of quality.

A mechanism to verify consistent implementation of elements of the next intergovernmental agreement in relation to ITE may be of benefit in ensuring the quality of ITE provision is consistent and that teachers graduate with a reliable level of proficiency.

Support for early career teachers

Additional support for early career teachers is critical and has been shown to be highly effective.³ However, recent approaches have been characterised by inconsistency. Whilst teachers in NSW schools receive beginning teacher support during their first two years in the permanent workforce, this can differ depending on school context. Many schools are finding it increasingly difficult to find locally available short-term relief to provide cover for teachers to attend professional learning to support their development as teachers and in more remote areas of the state, staff may have to travel long distances to a regional centre to access this type of support. There are also concerns that the quality of this professional learning can be varied.

Inconsistencies have also arisen for temporary teachers accessing beginning teacher support. Anomalies arise when, after several years of satisfactory full-time service as a temporary teacher, the individual is then appointed to a permanent position and becomes eligible for beginning teacher support. This is despite having already accumulated several years' experience as an effective practitioner and having had completed their accreditation at proficient level. Given the increasing numbers of extended temporary engagements, the SPC recommends that this type of support should be available for all beginning teachers, regardless of their employment status.

The SPC suggests mentoring is another important way to support early career teachers. Some schools already identify experienced teachers to act as mentors for early career teachers and, when implemented with adequate mentor training and support, this can be highly effective in building successful experiences for early career teachers. The SPC recommends that priority should be given to identifying appropriately experienced, skilled teachers with the capacity to mentor beginning teachers in every school, or, where school size or other factors make this impractical, across local networks of schools.

The NSW Department of Education did implement a Head Teacher Mentor Program approximately a decade ago which involved the identification of experienced practitioners who provided structured support for teachers across a community of schools. These teachers were remunerated at Head Teacher level and provided with additional release time to meet with beginning teachers, observe lessons and provide feedback based on the Australian Professional Teaching Standards. Despite being well-received and highly rated by mentors and the teachers they supported, the program was short-lived and disbanded after only 2-3 years.

Workload

Whilst it is true that several jurisdictions are making some efforts to reduce the administrative compliance tasks and other factors impacting on teacher workload, much of this work is being done without adequate consultation with the profession.

In some cases, the focus has been on 'reducing the number of keystrokes' to save time. Even if this work does make savings, they tend to be minute and often only impact on infrequent activities. For example, auto-populating elements of the Annual Report mainly impacts on the principal and possibly a small number of the school's

³ M. Hulme & J. Wood, 'The importance of starting well: the influence of early career support on job satisfaction and career intentions in teaching', (2022) *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46 504.

administrative team and is only a once per annum event. Savings of this type do not impact on the daily work of either teachers or school leaders.

Reducing the amount of mandated compliance training would make a tangible difference. A recent review by the SPC of compliance training required by NSW Department of Education found that teachers are required to complete 17.5 hours of compliance training each year. Whilst the SPC acknowledges that some training is critical to student safety and wellbeing (e.g. anaphylaxis training) and must be administered on an annual basis, we question whether it is necessary for all teachers to renew their training in other topics with the same frequency.

The SPC recommends that non-critical training be completed upon entry into the profession and thereafter at intervals of up to 3 years, unless there are critical policy/procedural updates or a school's circumstances change to warrant the need for a more immediate refresh.

Many compliance activities are driven by an overly risk-averse environment in which teacher professional judgement is neither trusted nor respected. Whilst it is appropriate for educators to be held accountable, the SPC asserts that teachers and principals are already highly accountable and that the level of monitoring/compliance activities could easily be reduced without compromising the integrity of school management practices.

The allocation and use of teaching assistants, known as School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) in NSW schools, as well as school administrative and support staff (SASS) is based on outmoded custom and practice. A thorough review of the non-teaching staffing requirements of modern schools must be undertaken so schools can be provided with a range of appropriately qualified and experienced staff to support teachers in classrooms and principals in school leadership.

In response to the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools made effective use of SLSOs for small group tuition for those students whose learning had been impacted. Initial data shows that this was an effective way of improving literacy/numeracy for many students. Current industrial and procedural practices, however, normally prohibit SLSOs and other non-teaching staff from working with students, or supervising them, without a teacher being present.

Similarly, the employment of Business Managers, Technical Support Officers, and other non-teaching specialists to support school leadership and administration could help to reduce much of the burden for managing finance, assets, health & safety, and the like, freeing the principal and other school leaders to focus more intently on educational leadership and decision making. Of critical importance is that these administrative supports report to the principal, who is best placed to make decisions based on the educational need of students.

The SPC rejects any suggestion that the principal of a school should not be a qualified educator with extensive experience in teaching and educational leadership. Subject matter expertise is critical to improving student outcomes. It is also critical that principals are supported by systems and preparation programs which enable them to lead effectively.

Workforce shortages

The SPC asserts that the increased complexity of teaching requires teachers to not only have content knowledge, but also the pedagogical understanding to engage with an increasingly diverse range of students.

There is a danger that current moves to strengthen ITE will be undermined by reducing the rigour of these courses in order to produce a supply of teachers who have not had sufficient training or practicum experience. Whilst fast-tracking other professionals into teaching may provide a short-term 'fix' to address the current teacher shortage, it also risks producing a cohort of teachers who may not have the skills to be able to demonstrate that they are proficient classroom practitioners in accordance with the Australian Professional Teaching Standards. This, in turn, may lead to teachers leaving the profession early as they struggle with the demands of teaching or being identified as teachers whose performance is causing concern.

Any initiative to streamline pathways for mid-career entrants must ensure that there are appropriate suitability assessments in place prior to acceptance and strong support programs to ensure that these teachers are sufficiently skilled to be able to teach children effectively.

The SPC finds it somewhat contradictory that whilst there are clear indicators of the need to enhance the status of the profession and strengthen ITE on the one hand, there are also suggestions that ITE and, potentially, teacher status should be weakened by lowering the standard of academic qualifications required to be a teacher.

The SPC recommends that should any streamlined processes be enacted for either ITE or mid-career teachers, that continuing employment should be contingent on clear demonstration of proficient performance against the teaching standards. These teachers should also be required to be working towards the completion of academic qualifications which are at least equivalent to the current requirements.

In relation to national initiatives to address teacher workforce issues, the SPC strongly recommends a national approach to identifying future workforce demands. This would facilitate greater consistency and enhance movement across jurisdictions, particularly in our communities located close to state and/or territory borders.

Equity in Student Outcomes

As Professor Laura B. Perry explains, educational opportunities and experiences directly impact on education outcomes.⁴ The SPC supports this view and suggests that improved outcomes for students in identified equity groups requires schools where these students are enrolled to have a full complement of appropriately qualified teachers. For example, a school is unlikely to improve the numeracy outcomes for students who do not have a qualified mathematics teacher in front of the class every day. Intervention at both school and system level is required to close the equity gap, which is pervasive and growing

Multiple studies, including those produced by the OECD, indicate that high performing nations tend to also be high equity.⁵ Australia, however, seems intent on increasing the educational inequity inherent in our unusual and unique funding of education. Until deliberate measures are taken to close the equity gap, we will be unable to improve our academic outcomes as a nation. A first step would be to ensure that every school meets the minimum School Resource Standard (SRS), as identified by the 2011 *Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report* ('Gonski Report'). Similarly, placing the responsibility for addressing the inequity in educational outcomes for students in identified cohorts is unlikely to have impact unless school systems also take responsibility for addressing this issue.

The interplay between student wellbeing and student achievement must also be addressed. Ongoing failure to provide adequate health and wellbeing supports will result in a continued decline in life and educational outcomes for students in disadvantaged cohorts. Whilst some of these supports are appropriately located within the school gates, such as counsellors/school psychologists and student support officers, there is a clear need to ensure that similar supports are also available within the school community. Community health and wellbeing impacts directly on student health and wellbeing and both need to be addressed strategically and holistically.

Another element crucial to addressing equity in student outcomes is the importance of early intervention. Findings from the 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) show the national percentage of children who were on track on 5 developmental domains decreased for the first time since 2009 (from 55.4% in 2018 to 54.8% in 2021) while also showing a slight increase in the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable.⁶ These results support the need for greater support and intervention to be in place prior to the commencement of primary education. Failure to do this means that children are not ready to commence their formal education and are at increased risk of falling further behind their peers as they progress through school.

Systemic inconsistency

Underpinning much of the debate about educational outcomes is a fundamental inconsistency between various principles underpinning education. Until these inconsistencies are resolved we are unlikely to achieve sustained improvement.

Key examples of this include the inherent conflict between the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration on Education and the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration calls for

⁴ L.B Parry, 'Educational Inequality in Australia', (2018) *How Unequal? Insights on Inequality*, CEDA, 58.

⁵ OECD, 'Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools', (2012) *OECD Publishing*.

⁶ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 'Australian Early Development v Census National Report' (2021) Commonwealth of Australia.

excellence and equity in education with a focus on the skills that students will need to thrive in the 21st Century such as: critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving and communication skills. In contrast, the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia tends to focus on the basic skills that are easily assessed through standardised test such as NAPLAN. Many experienced educators point to the pervasive focus on NAPLAN as leading to a diminution of the curriculum and a narrow focus on teaching to the test. This results in increased student disengagement, particularly in secondary school students in Years 8 and 9.

Similarly, much focus is placed on improving the numbers of students achieving in the top two bands in HSC. This, however, is largely impossible, due to the moderation of band distribution which ensures that the numbers of students in each performance band must remain largely unchanged. It also fails to consider that whilst NSW raised the minimum leaving age to 17 over a decade ago, leading to significant changes in the nature of our senior cohort, our Stage 6 curriculum and assessment remains significantly focused on the attainment of the ATAR and matriculation to university. While not inherently a bad thing, it does fail to acknowledge the increased diversity of our Stage 6 students and their varied motivations and aspirations.

In conclusion:

The advice and recommendations articulated in this submission represent the views of approximately 500 principals of schools with secondary enrolments across the state of NSW. This submission draws on material from formal SPC Position Papers (many of which have been publicly available for an extended time) and from extensive consultations with colleagues through surveys, reference groups and our State Assembly of regional delegates. The SPC also regularly conducts informal research on effective practice and engages in a regular program of professional learning which is informed by current research and demonstrated effective practice. Based on these activities, the SPC has continually advocated for resources and strategies to improve outcomes for students since the 1970s.

It is appropriate that government and education departments seek the views of a range of interested stakeholders prior to making decisions that will impact on our nation's schools. It is critical, however, that the voice of the profession be heard and respected when making decisions which will impact on our schools and our students. Failure to seek, hear and act on professional advice has been repeatedly shown to result in ineffective practice and inefficient use of resources.

The SPC strongly recommends the bodies and associations that represent teachers and principals be consulted early and regularly and that their advice must be appropriately acknowledged and respected when informing policy relating to education.

On behalf of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council.