



## Yvette Berry MLA

Deputy Chief Minister  
Minister for Early Childhood Development  
Minister for Education and Youth Affairs  
Minister for Housing and Suburban Development  
Minister for Women  
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Mr Michael Brennan  
Chair, Productivity Commission  
National School Reform Agreement  
Locked Bag 2, Collins St East  
Melbourne Vic 8003

Dear Mr Brennan

Thank you for your call for submissions to inform the Productivity Commission's review of the National School Reform Agreement.

The ACT Government is committed to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration to ensure all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community. The principle means of achieving this impact is through education systems that promote excellence through equity.

In addition to the Alice Springs Declaration outcomes, the ACT community has indicated that they see a focus on wellbeing as a cornerstone of education for the future and stressed the importance of equity as central to the vision of the ACT Government's Future of Education Strategy, achieved through:

- *Inclusion* - particularly relating to a young person's sense of belonging at school,
- *Access* - to the range of supports a learner might need, including access to diverse learning pathways, quality teachers and experiences that promote wellbeing, and
- *Growth in learning outcomes* - for all young people including those who experience disadvantage and/or are high achieving.

Through the National School Reform Agreement, the ACT Government has been an active and engaged participant in the national policy initiatives and continues to be interested in the benefits that can be achieved by education systems working together to address shared challenges and opportunities. Within this context it is important to continue to be mindful of the respective roles and responsibilities of each government. Further, in the context of COVID-19, it is timely

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to consider the new challenges and opportunities that will require our focus and shape success for all learners in the years ahead.

### Drivers of student outcomes

The experience of COVID-19 in recent years has focused attention on the current and emerging context for children and young people across Australia and highlighted the importance of education systems being geared to place students and families at the centre of decision making; including their wellbeing, equity of access, digital literacy, future-focused skills and relationships with educators, schools and broader community supports.

These themes resonate with the topics heard from the almost 5000 individuals (over half of these students) who contributed to the ACT's Future of Education Strategy. Seven broad themes were distilled during this consultation about what the community wants and needs for education in the ACT and include; Equity, Wellbeing, Personalised and Flexible Learning, Student Voice, Professional Learning, Collaboration and High Expectations.

The ACT community indicated the importance of equity as central to the vision of the Future of Education. They indicated that a focus on wellbeing is a cornerstone of education for the future, a position that was confirmed by the research of the OECD which indicates that 'In the 21st century [broad educational goals] have been increasingly defined in terms of wellbeing' (OECD 2018).

Analysis commissioned from the ANU and Gradient Institute by the ACT, and published in Scientific Reports on 8 February 2022, used machine learning techniques for causal inference to provide for the first time clear evidence supporting a causal relationship between students' wellbeing and their academic performance. Students with higher self-reported wellbeing scored higher on NAPLAN 7-8 months later. As the article concludes, "This research provides compelling evidence that promoting youth wellbeing and students' current (and future) performance are perfectly synergistic goals. In particular, protecting youth from depression can create a path towards better school performance and its associated benefits for the individual student and for national prosperity."

This focus on student wellbeing makes a key contribution to the ACT Government's Wellbeing Framework that includes twelve domains and is set to transform decision making in the ACT with wellbeing analysis of every potential government investments.

In addition to wellbeing, ACT community also emphasised **student voice** and agency within what is learnt and how the learning environment operates, as well as **personalised and flexible learning** as an important focus. They emphasised the importance of teachers and the need to support their capacity to teach through **professional learning**, and that high expectations and care should underpin all interactions. The community noted the research that supports the impact of having **high expectations** particularly for addressing equity.

The ACT community also emphasised the importance of improvement in **collaboration** between students and teachers; teachers and teachers; parents and schools; schools and schools; and schools with community agencies to best meet student need. This included strong support for collaboration with other agencies to create a school hub or school as community type model and prioritising time to collaborate and build successful partnerships.

The COVID-19 context has amplified the importance of these key themes in order to drive student outcomes. Never before have equity, wellbeing, personalised and flexible learning, student voice, professional learning, collaboration and high expectations been more necessary, not only locally within the ACT, but across Australia.

### National Policy Initiatives

As noted above, the ACT has been an active and engaged participant in the national policy initiatives (NPIs). The NPIs have required significant effort and commitment from all jurisdictions, and it is important that the time required to achieve their full effect be taken into account when assessing both the appropriateness and effectiveness of the NPIs. In addition, the ACT asserts that any agreed national initiatives must be undertaken in the spirit of partnership, collaboration and consensus. Since the Conran Review, this has not been upheld as

strongly as it was prior and as a result, progress on some initiatives has been fractured and momentum impacted.

The ACT suggests the following principles for identifying National Policy Initiatives suitable for the next national agreement:

- **Valued nationally**-The value, vision or effectiveness of a National Policy Initiative can only be achieved through harmonisation or a national approach.
- **Evidence informed**-Informed by robust evidence and research for how to improve educational outcomes.
- **Key enablers of improvement**- Concentrate on key enablers for improvement of educational outcomes that represent strong cost benefit propositions for States, Territories, and Sectors.
- **Mutually cooperative**-Leverage areas of shared responsibility and existing work, engage authentically with stakeholders, and recognise mutual obligations to contribute.
- **Flexible and sustainable**-Recognise State and Territory sovereignty, be adoptable and adaptable for different contexts to safeguard sustainability, and be delivered consistent with the Federation Funding Agreement principles (in particular, balancing priorities of all levels of government, ensuring budget autonomy and flexibility, and providing funding certainty)
- **Supportive**-Reduce and avoid burden or duplication and ensure national efforts are cognisant of the recovery timeframes needed in response to the impacts of COVID-19. This could, for example, include focusing on a smaller number of high impact areas for reform to minimise the impact on the workforce.

### National Measurement Framework

The ACT urges that wholesale reform of the National Measurement Framework be considered rather than minor amendments or 'tweaks' which have characterised changes in recent years.

Education systems across Australia should be underpinned by the right of all children to access high quality education. Not all children are able to access the same educational advantages when starting their education. Some children receive at-home and early childhood education, others first access education at the start of preschool. Children may also experience adversity at different stages of their education journey. The difference in access may be the result of socio-economic factors, physical or mental health or disability, cultural backgrounds or familial circumstance. For this reason, it is important that the National Measurement Framework focus on **equity** for all learners, regardless of circumstance.

Education systems must also ensure students succeed through the delivery of high-quality learning that engages students and supports the development of learning for life. For this reason, progress in student **learning gain** is an important measure of evaluating educational outcomes. Such measures must take into account that students generally experience a higher gain in their early years of schooling as they develop a foundation and understanding of new concepts in numeracy and literacy.

Developing students as individuals and creating a learning environment adapted to their needs is critical to achieving educational outcomes. Children enter the education sector with a diverse range of strengths and needs and education systems must respond and adapt teaching approaches to increase student outcomes. Quality peer relationships and a sense of school **belonging**, positively impacts the learning and wellbeing outcomes of students and the wellbeing of school staff.

There is a growing body of evidence that strengthening **student wellbeing** leads to improvements in educational and other school outcomes, including engagement with learning, reduced anxiety levels in students and reductions in challenging behaviours. As identified earlier in this submission, student wellbeing is therefore a lead indicator for student achievement. Student wellbeing is a complex concept, with multiple elements that can contribute in one way or another to how a student engages with school and learning. However, at its core, wellbeing is a personal construct can be considered to comprise a balance between:

- **life satisfaction**- being content with one's life,
- **the presence of positive affect**- for example, happiness and resilience, and

- **lack of negative affect**- for example, anxiety, loneliness and depression.

The National Measurement Framework would benefit from a focus on the above factors.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this review. I look forward to receiving the interim and final reports.

Yours sincerely

Minister for Education and Youth Affairs  
24/06/2022