

Submission from the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

## Response to the Interim Report on the Review of the National School Reform Agreement

October, 2022

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The NSRA can and should be a tool for reform. The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) represents 7,600 principals and school leaders, 156 000 teachers and 2.27 million students. In our response to the review of the NSRA, we emphasised that systems change requires an integrated set of responses that collectively contribute to making a difference.

In Australia, the dominant policy approach, for the past fifteen plus years, has focussed on measurement of outcomes - with a spectacular lack of success. Kids are not less intelligent or teachers less well prepared – in fact the literacy and numeracy professional learning, over the past 15 years, has probably exceeded in both quality and quantity, any that has come before. So, what is it we must change to achieve what we all want?

APPA argues that substantive change requires a substantial change in emphasis. This emphasis must turn the bureaucracy on its head and instead see systems actively partner with those ‘on the ground’ – in particular principals and teachers. The view from the ground would quickly reveal that change is not a linear, cause-effect process. The view from the ground would reveal, as the Productivity Commission’s draft review says, that the “[educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts](#)” (p. 31), are many and are unlikely to be solved by specific ‘initiatives’. The view from the ground says that unless we have whole of community, integrated, inter-agency supports for high needs families, we are unlikely to get anywhere. Abused, scared, alienated, hungry children, aren’t focussed on learning.

We argue that a singular focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes (often divided up into additional measures of outcomes for target groups as well) results in an overall degradation of the system – a loss of fun, joy, participation and belonging. Of course we want to see an increase in literacy and numeracy outcomes; of course we want to see better outcomes and participation from some of the more marginalised groups in our communities; but current policy settings are not achieving this. APPA is in strong agreement with Draft finding 2.2 in this regard – [relying too much on NPIs that are a single solution to common issues has delayed reform outcomes](#). And [outcomes do not adequately capture non-academic domains](#). And [there is a poor connection between policy making and implementation in the classroom](#) – we would add, ‘and poor recognition and involvement of school leaders in policy setting’.

APPA's submission focused on an integrated set of changes which provide opportunities to review and reimagine the future of education in this country. Underpinning this agenda are five principles for action:

1. *The need for policy development input from schools*

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. Serious school reform needs to look at structuring a school/bureaucracy interface which operates by working *with* schools in developing workable policy positions.

2. *Equality through equity*

Social disadvantage is a well-documented factor strongly linked to poorer outcomes for children. 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.

3. *Interagency and NGO coordination.*

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. If we want true school reform, we must have coherent, joined up services that work with children and families in need. 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.

4. *Accountability –*

a. *Establishment of a manageable matrix of measures to assess the health of the whole system.*

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**. Further, this matrix should be expanded to provide measures of whole of community strength.

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

This means It is time to rethink an 'all-in' testing approach and return to sample-testing to illuminate and assess the performance of jurisdictions.

5. *A New Primary Curriculum.*

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. The curriculum documents should have begun with school and classroom practice realities, especially in primary school and particularly in the early years.



We note the Productivity Commission addresses some of these ideas and expresses particular concern for addressing inequality, student outcomes and expanding the discussion of outcomes to include student wellbeing.

However, APPA remains concerned that the assumption that seems to be in place is that improvement can be addressed by a series of individual initiatives rather than a more integrated approach.

The interim report states that “[despite the large increase in public funding since 2018, student outcomes have stagnated](#).” Yet the interim report suggests a continued approach of much the same – prioritising a set of projects that sound good but do little to address the fundamental problems underpinning bureaucratic interaction with education in this country. Under the policy settings adopted for the last 20 years, education has failed to thrive. Yet the blame is continually apportioned to schools rather than questioning the bureaucratic structures which set the conditions under which schools are operating. This must change.

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 and inhibits schools responding community by community, to pressing local needs.

APPA is heartened by the Commission's recognition that a “[...key challenge in lifting school performance is that policy deliberations ... can be far removed from the daily realities of classrooms, teachers and students. A theme of this report is the need for the next NSRA to move beyond system architecture and drive real improvements on the ground. To be successful, the NSRA will need to close the distance between national policy making and classroom practice. Each should inform the other — with teachers and school leaders influencing policy, and evidence-based approaches gaining more traction in schools and classrooms.](#)” We agree. Listen to those who have on the ground experience and as we state in step one, involve school personnel in policy development. We will be happy to provide insight into what is likely to be effective on the ground.

### **High impact policy shifts are needed**

In APPA's view, some of the most effective changes in making a difference on the ground are remarkably simple to achieve.

**Firstly**, shift national measurements to focus on the **performance of educational jurisdictions**. This should be achieved by comprehensive **sample testing**, not national testing of all children through mechanisms such as NAPLAN. APPA contends that this creates a vicious cycle of competition for better NAPLAN results and in that process, redirects teaching towards a greater focus on test outcomes.



Draft finding 1.1 notes that “Student achievement has stagnated, while attainment has improved and engagement has declined. Although the proportion of students completing school has increased since 2015, the proportion attending school regularly has declined, with much of this decline predating COVID-19.” APPA contends that this is quite probably related to the changed emphasis in teaching, driven by national testing. NAPLAN is well intentioned but wrong. Its unintended consequence is to redirect teaching to a narrower focus with, conversely, **less engagement of children with schooling**.

**Secondly**, we need a new primary curriculum. 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. The curriculum documents should have begun with school and classroom practice realities, especially in primary school and particularly in the early years.

This directly relates to student engagement. As the Commission noted, engagement has declined. We want to engage all children, whatever their passion. If we can increase participation, we feel we can better engage children in education and improve literacy and numeracy outcomes in the process. All children matter. And we want them attending school regularly. Having a curriculum which allows the space for literacy and numeracy together with activities which make students a part of their communities, which makes them feel they belong, is important. Being involved in sport teams, art, drama, music, school productions, those things which build a community and human relationships are the heart of schooling. We want children to feel they belong and activities which involve building a community are the things that connect kids and make them a part of the community and the community part of schools. To provide an example, perhaps a Productivity Commission recommendation could be to prioritise the involvement of children in various community activities, in sport teams, in productions. Perhaps the Commission could recommend good kitchen facilities in all schools so that children can prepare meals for themselves and others. Perhaps the Commission could highlight the importance of kitchen gardens in schools so that children could learn to grow vegetables and to prepare simple meals with their own produce. Perhaps we could encourage specialist teachers who can assist with these redirected curriculum priorities – and in the process watch as literacy and numeracy outcomes improve!

**Thirdly**, APPA contends that to make a difference in the lives of children, we must advocate for Interagency and NGO coordination. 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. If we want true school reform, we must have coherent, joined up services that work with children and families in need. A child’s world doesn’t consist of separate entities such as siloed government agencies, social welfare systems, voluntary organisations, family and friends. A child’s world intersects with all of these. It is a reminder to us that a fragmented policy approach to addressing the complexity of children’s lives is mechanistic and shallow.

A new way of capturing this interconnected whole might be to advocate for **whole of community education outcomes**. This emphasises the role of many partners in the education and care of our children. “A village to raise a child”. Indicators that capture the **strength of a community** are important.



## Some additional Comments

**Unique Student Identifier:** APPA has no issue with pursuing a USI, if it keeps children connected with schooling. We see the main benefit of a USI is ensuring that students who move from one jurisdiction to another enrol in another school. But it is a single project and in isolation, projects such as these aren't going anywhere.

**Wellbeing:** On page 9 of the report, the Productivity Commission expresses particular concern for student outcomes, addressing inequality and expanding the discussion of outcomes to include student wellbeing. APPA welcomes the inclusion of wellbeing but suggests that this list is perhaps in the wrong order - a focus on increasing wellbeing first, usually results in better outcomes. As discussed above, an emphasis on participation and projects which enhance belonging to a community (sport, productions, healthy life styles) are wellbeing focussed and achievable through curriculum reform and interagency coordination.

**National Measurement Framework for Australian Schools:** when this is reviewed, it should focus on measuring the performance of jurisdictions through sample testing of all indices.

**Teacher Assistants:** p.36 of the report looks at understanding teacher assistant roles and their possible expansion. Teacher Assistants play very important roles in schools however, the balance between the number of TAs and teachers, needs to be carefully considered. The work of Michael Giangreco from Vermont may be of interest to Commissioners in this regard.

**Initial Teacher Education:** The Commission seeks feedback on whether ITE adequately equips teachers to identify and respond to the needs of students from priority equity cohorts and whether more can be done to further embed the views of priority equity cohorts in national education policies and the merits of establishing a national Indigenous consultative body on education (p.19). APPA holds the view that there is a limit to how much can be covered in ITE courses. University is only the beginning. We advocate for a model which markedly increases the prioritisation, breadth and depth of school-university partnerships in ITE and structural supports including incentives and partnerships to support and challenge teacher continuous improvement.

Information request 4.1 2. Asks: "Is knowledge in recognising and responding to poor wellbeing and trauma sufficiently covered in Initial Teacher Education and Teacher Performance Assessments? If not, how might this be improved?" Trauma informed practice is an increasingly recognised focus in schools. Again, APPA welcomes this inclusion in the Commission's considerations and while we believe this should be a part of ITE courses, we also maintain the importance of partnerships between schools and ITE providers, in continuous teacher education.

**Intensive, targeted support for students who have fallen behind** (Information request 3.1): The Commission asks the question "Would programs that provide intensive, targeted support to students who have fallen behind lend themselves to being a national policy initiative under the next intergovernmental agreement on schools?"



APPA welcomes additional targeted support and intervention but cautions that this support should be strongly linked to programs which link the student with the school community.

As argued above, programs which build on students' strengths are important steps in increasing student participation. We argue that students who are engaged with schooling are more likely to have better outcomes and that the curriculum must encourage this approach. As a nation we need to address the reasons why students are falling behind and these are not always academic.

**Reducing teacher workload:** Draft recommendation 5.2 recommends reducing teacher workload should be a focus of the next agreement. APPA welcomes this important initiative. In addition to the emphasis on reducing low value and inefficient demands on teachers' time, we would like to ensure that the provision of quality and appropriate planning time is a part of these considerations.

**School leadership:** Draft finding 6.1 recognises the importance of school leadership and this is welcome. APPA supports the questions asked by the Commission in information request 6.1 but holds the view that school leaders must be trained teachers.

1. Do principals have the resources, support and professional development opportunities required for their demanding roles?
2. Are policy efforts to identify and prepare potential leaders effective?
3. Are there alternative sources of school leaders, including from outside the teaching profession?
4. What are the relative merits of a nationally coordinated approach to supporting a pipeline of future school leaders?

APPA will be pleased to expand on any of the areas detailed in this response to the Interim Report. We want to see improved outcomes and believe that this is an achievable goal. We believe that schools need input into decisions that affect them and that harnessing the on the ground experience of school leaders and teachers will greatly enrich the effectiveness of policy agendas.

The NSRA can be a tool for reform. We want the next NSRA to set 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*.

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