



Australian Parents Council

Submission for the 2022 Productivity Commission Review into the National School Reform Agreement.

The Australian Parents Council (APC) thanks the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to participate in this review and puts forth the following perspectives.

- **APC encourages systemic change toward the innovative educational experience that is required for our children to be ready for the new world of work.**
- **APC strongly advocates that Student Wellbeing, Student Belonging, Student Agency & Parent Engagement measures must be included as targeted outcomes for future education reform agreements.**
- **APC believes that every child should have access to a quality education regardless of the school sector their parents choose. All government school students should be funded to 100% of the resourcing standard.**
- **The federal, state and territory governments must address the growing issues of technological infrastructure inequity.**
- **To address the growing wellbeing issues within schools, collaboration across government departments best facilitates inclusive, healthy and holistic educational experiences.**

The Australian Parents Council is a representative body that bridges the gap between parents and government policymakers. We are on a mission to help all children thrive in non-government schools. To be successful in this goal we need both sound government policy and empowered parents to ensure academic, social and emotional success in all students.

The Australian Parents Council has provided this service and provided parents with an avenue to participate by delivering a trustworthy voice on education policy for over 60 years. We are a non-denominational, non-party political organisation that advocates for parents with children in non-government schools (Catholic and Independent) and for Australian parents more generally. We are an independent, diverse, and inclusive organisation of parents from all states and territories of Australia.

The work of the Australian Parents Council over many years has contributed to the improvement of children's educational experiences and outcomes, progressive reforms in schooling, and investments in the social capital of school communities throughout Australia.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute our views on the 2022 review into the National Schools Reform Agreement from the parent perspective.

Kind regards,

Jennifer Rickard

President

Australian Parents Council

DRIVERS OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

What does the evidence suggest are key drivers of student outcomes across the three key NSRA domains – academic achievement, engagement and skill acquisition

The Australian Parents Council supports the fully evidenced key outcomes of student achievement, engagement and skill acquisition as being suitable and broad enough to capture the successes of all students within the education system.

Whilst the APC highly commends the inclusion of student engagement as a key outcome there is much that could be improved in this outcomes area. Having only 1 indicator of success in the framework is insufficient and APC recommends broadening the measures of this outcomes. There is a plethora of academic research that interrogates student engagement. It is concerning that research finds that 40% of students are compliant but disengaged from their schooling and that this is a leading cause of teacher job dissatisfaction. (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017)

An additional sub-outcome that should be considered under student engagement is family and community engagement. NAPLAN data is showing that parent academic achievement is an emerging factor that impacts student achievement. ACARA's 2021 media release announced an emerging trend regarding students whose parents had not finished year 12. (ACARA 2021) This evidence lends itself to considering the impact, implications and initiatives to educate and empower student and parent engagement. APC supports policies that can help families to overcome familial as well as socio-economic barriers in achieving cooperative access to the Australian education system.

Are there barriers that disproportionately impact outcomes for specific cohorts of students?

Clearly the already identified equity barriers are the most important issues to be addressed via these measures. However, APC identifies a growing barrier facing all students within the education system is the fact they are technological wave natives working and existing within an Industrial age system. Not only from the perspective that the number of compliant but disengaged students speaks to an environment that doesn't excite, inspire or connect with them but also because there is no equity across our nation in terms of technology infrastructure. The federal, state and territory governments must address the growing issues of technological infrastructure inequity. Whether it is access to fast internet, access to functional up to date technological devices or easily accessible training and professional development for teachers to be one step in front of students' technological abilities. APC believes access, understanding and delivery of policy that enhances the lives of our digital native children is imperative.

Which of these drivers or barriers can governments change or influence?

Life no longer exists within the stovepipes of which our government delivers its services. Factors outside the education domain have huge impact upon students trying to navigate the education system. The biggest example we currently have is the mental health crisis. Knocking down the curtains between education, health and social services would go a long way towards successful outcomes in this crisis. Locating schools as community hubs would be greatly beneficial to addressing the shortfalls of this system. Many families are already trying to navigate across departments when it comes to the health, social or additional needs of their children.

APC strongly advocates that student wellbeing measures must be included as targeted outcomes for future education reform agreements.

Have these drivers changed over the past decade or over the life of the NSRA?

Student engagement has undertaken massive growth upon the back of increased student participation, research and desire to understand the benefits of student agency. Student agency should form an indicator of success for the reform agenda moving forward.

While attendance is important for student engagement research and global experiences have moved the agenda beyond mere attendance creating an impact upon student engagement. It is the APC's belief that belonging forms a much more meaningful measure of student engagement and student wellbeing. These two factors are at the forefront of every parent's concern for their children. A 2018 APC Parent Sentiment Survey showed that student wellbeing was a concern for 78% of parents. Knowing that this is a central issue for parents compels the inclusion of wellbeing and student agency to be included in the policy agenda.

APC would like to see this measure extend beyond the school gates. The ACT has a Youth Forum facilitated through the Board of Senior Secondary Studies that give students the opportunity to discuss issues pertaining to senior secondary studies with policy makers. Victoria has a Student Representative Council for government school students. APC would like to see a collaborative approach for states and territories to provide opportunities for students to engage at all levels of education policy, from having a voice in their own school all the way up to the federal level.

Despite feelings of belonging at school only recently arriving on the research agenda, there are some studies that prove school belonging has a huge impact on the success of students. (Allen 2022) And whilst research on the effectiveness of frameworks is emerging Australia should be leading from the front and making student belonging at the very least a policy initiative and introducing measures to monitor the impact upon student engagement and student progress.

Looking forward, are the changes in the external environment or policy context that will affect these drivers?

State governments are responsible for health and education outcomes. Yet, much of these measures place the responsibility for improvement on the shoulders of students, teachers and school leaders. Education Ministers, Education directorates also need measures to provide transparency and accountability of their own actions to improve the overarching system. The entire system needs to be accountable. The National School Reform Agreement framework generates a lot of quantitative data like movement of percentages into higher benchmarks and places a huge emphasis on performance of students. APC would like to see more qualitative measures that determine the impact of policy directions or cultural change within education departments included in future agreements.

Further to this, APC believes that every child should have access to a quality education regardless of the school sector their parents choose. The debate has very much moved on from the funding wars and the backroom deals for funding. All children in government schools should be funded at 100% of the resourcing standard. And no child should lose current funding to achieve this. (Other than the 2 jurisdictions that are still above the 20% non-government sector state contribution) States and territories need to understand the importance of collaboration with the federal government and uphold their responsibilities towards funding. Just as the federal government should be responsible for assisting in funding equitably solutions to issues. Allowing state school funding to be used as a political lever across the jurisdictions is not in the best interests of our children nor in the best interests for education in Australia.

ASSESSING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY INITIATIVES

The NSRA provides some guidance on the nature of national initiatives. Are there other principles that should be applied when identifying NPI's suitable for inclusion in a national agreement? What should these be?

Parent and community engagement is a core theme of the Melbourne and Alice Spring Declaration, but it remains missing from the measurement matrix despite there being clear evidence that positive parent engagement increases student outcomes. APC advocates for policy initiatives that move parental engagement from a body of evidence showing that parent engagement improves student achievement to a well implemented and supported practice where all families, regardless of background, are empowered to engage appropriately with their school, academic content and where all schools value the role and impact that families have on student outcomes.

Covid-19 has provided a rollercoaster ride for parents attempting to engage with their children's education. Firstly, it was widely reported that during remote learning parental engagement levels were exceptionally high due to the necessity of parents in assisting teachers to aid students in accessing their education. However, once school returned to in-person learning and restrictions were necessary in maintaining safe environments, parents were essentially locked out. In some cases, parents had many months of working in partnership with teachers, building their understanding of the curriculum, gaining a clearer understanding of the work teachers do and understanding their own capacity to contribute to learning outcomes. But the momentum made by these gains was brought to a halt and in many cases was sent catapulting backwards by being locked outside of the school gate.

The biggest concern for the Australian Parents Council is that for the first time we have fleetingly witnessed authentic parent engagement in educational outcomes. The magic that has real impact upon student progress and outcomes. The stuff that multiple research projects have proven has real impact upon children and their learning. For the first time parents we not positioned as subservient to the schools needs in terms of raising funds for the schools or building social capital or network for the parent body. But we have failed to capitalise on the opportunity and take advantage to embed the practices into everyday school life.

The APC strongly advocates that the time is now to entrench strong parent, family and community policy into the practice of every school and not lose the gains in an otherwise terrible period of time.

What policy areas are best suited to national collaboration and why? Of these which are best pursued through NSRA?

Policy and reform targeting parental engagement in educational lends itself well to national collaboration as it has been done previously. The Family School Partnership Bureau was an initiative of the Australian Council of State School Organisation and the Australian Parents Council supported by government. Re-opening the partnership bureau to refresh, update, evolve and better implement practice for parent, family and community engagement by sharing best practice and case studies from across the nation would be advantageous. Additionally, working collaboratively across states and territories gives the opportunity for school communities to be responsive to their communities need. And some states and territories are already supporting initiatives to encourage, support and grow this area.

Is there any unfinished business associated with implementing the NPI's that would justify including additional actions in the next SRS Agreement?

There is no clear reporting on the success or impact of the measure currently being implemented through the framework. Therefor as an inward observer and not direct user of the measures it makes it hard for parents to comment. As an organisation we have been heavily involved in aspects of the senior secondary pathways review. We submitted document for the review, we have read the findings, we have committed to projects within DESE to assist parents to understand senior secondary pathways. We have undertaken projects to promote Vocational Education and Training Pathways. As active participants of this process we are still left wondering if any impact has been made in the perceptions of these pathways at all?

An existing positive example of this is the documentation and case studies ACARA has published on what high performing schools have done to improve their results. Similar publications and case studies should be created to measure and understand not only the impact but the how the impacts were created and the direct correlations of these policy levers.

For example, case studies for how schools have interacted with AERO and how it has changed their teaching practice to more broader research projects where direct measures of impact are undertaken and analysed.

Policy changes need to be filtered down into all aspects of the educational landscape. If teachers are not feeling the impact of the creation of AERO or parents and students do not clearly understand the senior secondary pathways or teachers are not feeling more equipped to enter classrooms on completion of their degree, have these initiatives been successful policy levers at all?

Are there other initiatives that would better address key needs or government priorities for schooling?

The Australian Parents Council recognises that many policies objectives promote a top-down approach. Policies are developed outside of the domain of which they will be implemented, that is school communities. APC would like to see a function of a government organisation to be sourcing case studies of best practice from policy initiatives and platforming them.

Additionally, innovation in education needs to be recognised by education policy. For decades now we have been told that the “new world of work” is coming and that our kids’ jobs have not been invented yet. The message has been clear that innovation, transferrable skills, technology skills, critical thinking and the general capabilities are the future for our children. We need an education system that recognises and promotes that. Innovation in education should be government priority for schooling.

Finally, APC has a clear understanding that that individual school communities are unique; they are best served to be innovative in identifying the need of their community and implementing processes, but those processes need to have been guided by evidence. Intervention at a local level carries value and that can be difficult to manage from a federal level. APC is aware that the federated model of our education system often leaves states and territories tussling over equal footing or equitable models distributed by population. The Gonski Review promoted student need as the biggest driver of equity but often in the largess of the system by the time this trickles down to those least served by the education system it has become small and meaningless. Centring school as the subject matter experts of the community in which they operate leaves them as the best placed to identify need, gaps and challenges and they should be encouraged and incentivised to devise innovative solutions to their problems. School leaders should be skilled and empowered to take these measures. APC believes that policy and funding needs to support school’s at the local level to achieve this.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY INITIATIVES

Is there evidence that the NPI’S have achieved expected short or medium term outcomes (such as states and territories, schools or teachers using resources produced by the NPI’S)

APC would like to highlight that this model is heavily weighted towards KPI’s that favour measures of performance with little consideration to measures of effectiveness. The annual reporting published on the DESE website speaks to the level of project completion but there are no reports on the impact these measures have directly had on student achievement, engagement and readiness for post school pathways. Publicly available and promoted reports on the impact of these initiatives that have direct impact upon their children would be advantageous.

Are the NPI’s likely to be equally effective for all student cohorts, including equity cohorts or are more tailored measures required?

APC believes it is unlikely that the current NPI’s would have a direct impact upon equity cohorts and more tailored measures are essential. Effective equity measures should be specific to each cohort and decided in conjunction with the cohort. Although APC believes that targeted National Policy Initiatives for these equity areas would be advantageous, the critical factor is they included broader measures that measure the impact for behavioural change on the wider community. For example, funding and support for students with a disability is essential just for children

to be able to access their education. However, many parents report the difficulties they face when advocating for this measure to be placed within everyday practice within classrooms. Simple interventions like assistive technology for reading can be viewed as giving an advantage to students with additional needs when the assessment piece is a reading comprehension test. An issue can occur when there is a difference in ideology between the parent and the teacher as to what the purpose of education is for that individual child. A parent's goals for a child's education can be very different to the educational goals a teacher strives for. A perception change by the wider education community that assistive technologies is not an advantage for some students and that their ability to access their education is only one example of the need for broader impact of policy objectives.

This puts parents in a difficult position because the APC would love to suggest more training and more professional development for teachers into disability and interventions, or cultural education, however, we are well aware that teachers are already operating at full capacity. And much of the change required is also required at a much higher level. State department procedures supporting students use of assistive technologies would be advantageous. Cultural change within education around the use of assistive technologies and other interventions would be the ultimate policy agenda.

Similarly, APC fully backs cultural capacity building for all school equity cohorts including funding and support for all schools to have First Nations Cultural Educators, Family and Community Liaison Officers and Culture and language specialist to serve CALD communities to be fully funded across all school sectors across the nation.

MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Do the objectives, outcomes, targets and sub-outcomes in the NSRA align with the aspirations set out in other key documents such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration?

As previously discussed, APC believes the biggest omission in alignment of the NSRA to the Mparntwe Declaration is family and community engagement.

Does the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia provide a relevant reliable and complete picture of students outcomes both as identified with the NSRA and more broadly?

The Australian Parents Council believes parents are seeking evidence that the Australian Education system is delivering an innovative, modern and relevant to real world skills our children have been told they will require to be active participant in the New World of Work.

It is APC's belief that the current measures generally maintain the status quo of the education system. The performance measures are deeply embedded in Industrial age. While literacy and numeracy measure are always going to be central to a good education, academics do not form the be all and end all. APC has fears that the excessive importance placed on student performance and achievement over student progress, wellbeing and recognition and celebrating diverse skills has driven the need to constantly measure and assess students thereby tipping the scales to no longer provide a balance educational experience or working environment.

Are there performance indicators not included in the measurement framework that would help provide a more relevant, reliable and complete picture of student outcomes, both as identified within the NSRA and more broadly?

APC advocates that more work be conducted on measuring student engagement. It is broadly understood that student engagement has a big impact not only on students themselves but teacher job satisfaction. (Sullivan 2014) Merely, measuring student attendance doesn't interrogate students' level of engagement nor the reasons for the lack of engagement. While it is a suitable measure to identify a problem it does not speak to the severity or

underlying reason of the issue. Covid-19 has exacerbated the issue of school refusal and measures beyond attendance need to be found to address this issue that has the potential to be missed via this measurement.

What are some current or planned national data projects that might be relevant to measuring progress against outcomes of the NSRA?

The Australian Parents Council has been conducting a desktop study measuring how schools say they conduct their parent engagement and the work that parents do within school communities against the Family School Partnership Framework. (DESE 2000) The project involves scanning every non-government school website to ascertain how they describe their school parent body and the work that they conduct. Additionally, annual reports are scanned to collect information on activities the school conducts and is mandated to report on. As well as gathering information if available from parent surveys.

Parent Engagement has been a part of the education policy landscape for over a decade and yet parents still report difficulties in their relationships with schools, understanding their influence on educational outcomes and the knowing effective ways to engage with the school community. Our research clearly shows that schools continue to position parent input as subservient to the needs of the school and platforms fundraising as the ultimate way to engage with the school. While this is the case little impact will be made and the gains of parental engagement on educational outcomes will not be realised.

References

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