Review to Inform a
Better and Fairer Education System

Consultation Paper

Contents

Chapter 1: Meeting the needs of all students and shaping the nation's future

Education transforms lives – it is the key to unlocking the ability of individuals to reach their full potential, contribute to society and engage in the workforce. It is the key to improving social equity and lifting social and economic outcomes for individuals and their families and communities.

Australia's current education system already provides this to many students – but not to all.

In addition, Australia's future prosperity and international competitiveness depend on an education system that promotes excellence and equity. All Education Ministers committed to this in the *2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (the Mparntwe Education Declaration).

The Expert Panel (the Panel) leading the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (the Review) firmly believes that the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) can help bring the Mparntwe Education Declaration to life by providing young Australians the best educational opportunities. We consider that this will need firm action by all governments, systems and schools, but with national effort and commitment, we see a positive future for Australian education.

Education should support young Australians to become successful lifelong learners who have strong literacy and numeracy skills and deep knowledge of the world, are able to think creatively, logically and inquisitively, can adapt to new ways of learning, and can continue to improve through formal and informal learning. Schools should also be inspiring and rewarding places to work for our best and brightest.

To fulfill this vision of education requires evidence-informed education policies, reforms and classroom practices. In addition, it requires an innovative and aspirational spirit among all involved to drive continuous improvement. It requires valuing every student and every staff member, and being able to identify and provide the supports necessary for all members of the school community to thrive. It requires national agreement on the purpose of education and cooperation on reform.

1.1 Getting ready for further transformation

The NSRA is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments that sets out reforms in areas where national collaboration will have the greatest impact on lifting student outcomes across Australian schools. The Panel has been asked to advise Education Ministers on the targets and reforms that will drive improvements to support better student outcomes. The Panel is tasked with delivering recommendations on reforms in five key areas:

1. Lifting student outcomes
2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing
3. Attracting and retaining teachers
4. Data collection
5. Transparency of and accountability for school funding.

The Review will not examine the calculation of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

The Panel notes the Commonwealth Education Minister's commitment to working with state and territory governments to put schools on a path to full and fair funding.[1] As the Commonwealth Education Minister has noted, what is even more important than full and fair funding is what this funding does, what reforms it is tied to and what difference it makes to students.[2] The same sentiment was emphasised in the final report of the 2011 *Review of Funding for Schooling* led by David Gonski AC:

> The panel accepts that resources alone will not be sufficient to fully address Australia's schooling challenges and achieve a high-quality, internationally respected schooling system. The new funding arrangements must be accompanied by continued and renewed efforts to strengthen and reform Australia's schooling system.[3]

The Panel considers that Australia's school systems should deliver strong literacy and numeracy skills and academic knowledge, alongside a broader range of student outcomes. Evidence-based initiatives are of particular interest. Panel members are keen to hear about approaches that have been proven to support student learning and wellbeing and how these could be applied.

About the National School Reform Agreement

The NSRA is supported by bilateral agreements between the Commonwealth and each state and territory. The bilateral agreements set out:

- jurisdiction-specific actions to improve student outcomes
- each jurisdiction's minimum required funding contributions as a condition of receiving Commonwealth funding.

The current NSRA commenced in 2019 and was due to expire at the end of 2023. It is being extended until the end of 2024 to enable the Review to advise all Education Ministers on the specific reforms and targets that should be tied to funding in the next NSRA.

The Review was launched on 29 March 2023, with the announcement of its terms of reference (see Attachment A) and Expert Panel: Dr Lisa O'Brien AM (Chair), Ms Lisa Paul AO PSM (Deputy Chair), Ms Dyonne Anderson, Dr Jordana Hunter, Professor Stephen Lamb and Professor Pasi Sahlberg.

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1. The Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, 29 March 2023.
2. The Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, 5 May 2023.
3. Gonski et al. 2011, p. xix.

1.2 Australia's education system is set within a complex strategic landscape and requires cooperation to excel

The Commonwealth, state and territory governments share responsibility for school education and have traditionally worked together to determine priorities and develop the architecture, funding mechanisms and resources required to meet shared goals.

Constitutional responsibility for school education mainly rests with states and territories, all of which have their own regulatory frameworks, policies and priorities intended to maximise local students' educational outcomes. The Commonwealth contributes to education policy through national agreements and payments to the states and territories.

A number of national bodies support and monitor the education system including:
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITSL)
- Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)
- Education Services Australia (ESA)
- The National School Resourcing Board (NSRB).

In developing this consultation paper, the Panel has taken into consideration the findings and recommendations of recent reviews, reports and initiatives including the 2023 review of the current NSRA (www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report) by the Productivity Commission, the 2022 National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (www.education.gov.au/teaching-and-school-leadership/resources/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan), the 2022 Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (QITE Review) (www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review) and the current work of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) (www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/teacher-education-expert-panel).

The Productivity Commission examined how well national policy initiatives set by the Commonwealth and by state and territory governments have achieved the objectives and outcomes set out in the current NSRA. The Productivity Commission recommended redesigning the agreement to focus more attention on lifting academic results for all students, supporting quality teaching and school leadership, and promoting student wellbeing.

Many other recent and current reviews are highly relevant to the Panel. These will be considered as part of the final report to Education Ministers.

The Panel also acknowledges that other key reviews into education are currently underway: the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood education and care (led by Professor Deborah Brennan AM), and the Australian Universities Accord higher education review (led by Professor Mary O'Kane AC). These concurrent processes provide a unique opportunity to look at the education system as a whole and transform the end-to-end education journey to ensure its elements work cohesively to deliver excellence and equity.

With respect to equity, the Review is also an opportunity to ensure alignment across the next NSRA and other key national strategies and agreements, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031. Further information on the definition and scope of equity is considered in Chapter 2.

School statistics

Govt ■ **Cath** ■ **Ind**
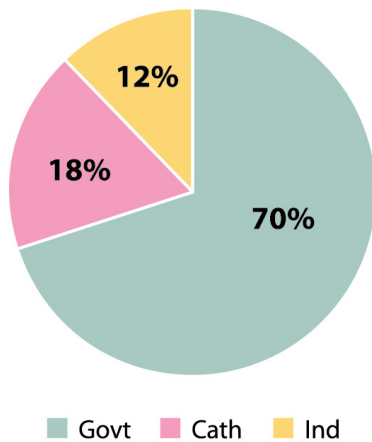
In 2022, there were **9,614 schools** in Australia. **70%** were government schools, **18%** Catholic schools and **12%** independent schools.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2022) Schools Australia, Table 90a

Govt ■ **Cath** ■ **Ind**
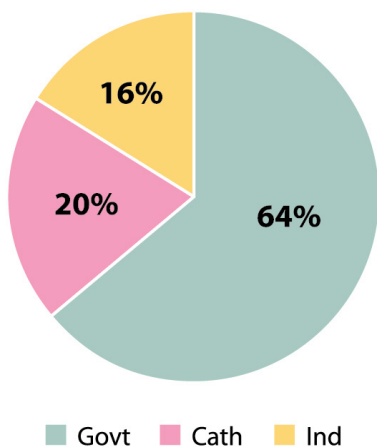
In 2022, **64%** of students* were enrolled in government schools, **20%** in Catholic schools and **16%** in independent schools.

Source: ABS (2022) Schools Australia, Table 43a
Full time equivalent (FTE) students

Primary ■ **Secondary**
Combined ■ **Special**
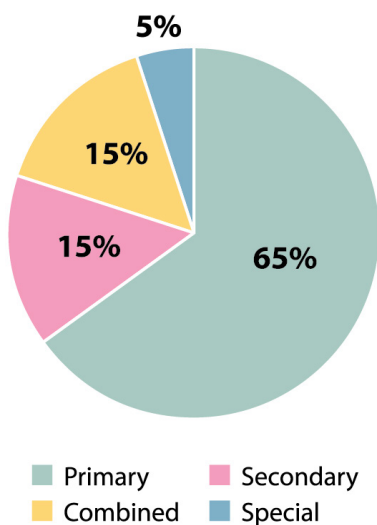
Almost two-thirds of all schools in Australia are **primary schools**.

Source: ABS (2022) Schools Australia, Table 35b

Student statistics

In 2022, there were **4,042,512 students** in Australia.

Source: ABS (2022),, Schools Release Table 90a

6.3% of all students enrolled in Australian schools identified as **Aboriginal** or **Torres Strait Islander**.

Source: ABS (2022), Schools Release, Table 90a

22.5% of school students in Australia had a **disability**.

Source: ACARA (2022) National Report on Schooling Data Portal

27.3% of students* were enrolled in **inner regional**, **outer regional, remote** or **very remote** areas of Australia.

Source: ABS (2022) Schools Release, Table 46a

* FTE students

In 2021, **total recurrent government funding** of **$61.26 billion** was provided to schools:

$37.44 billion (61.1%) was provided by **states and territories**

$23.82 billion (38.9%) was provided by the **Commonwealth**

$11.61 billion (15.6%) was provided through income from **fees**, **charges**, and **parent contributions.**

$1.68 billion (2.3%) was provided through income from **other private sources.**

Source: ACARA (2023) The National Report on Schooling in Australia 2021, School income and capital expenditure for government and non-government schools (calendar year)

1.3 Your views are important to us

The purpose of this consultation paper is to gather more information on the issues and opportunities that the Panel considers the next NSRA should prioritise. This paper asks for your views on the key areas of focus for the Review. The Panel invites submissions on the questions raised in this paper, as well as any other ideas you might have to improve Australia's education system. The Panel wants to hear a variety of perspectives from across the education system, including teachers, parents, students, school leaders, unions, assistants, administrators, government and non-government organisations, stakeholders and researchers.

The Panel has already undertaken a number of consultations in the lead-up to this paper, talking to people in every state and territory, meeting with Education Ministers, departments, stakeholders and experts, and visiting a range of schools to understand the issues faced on the ground. The Panel will continue to undertake extensive consultation in coming months, focusing on the issues outlined in this paper. The Panel has also sought the views of students, teachers and parents/guardians through a survey conducted by the Social Research Centre. The survey asked about issues including student health and wellbeing, and teacher attraction and retention.

The NSRA Ministerial Reference Group (MRG) has been established and will be a sounding board and source of advice to Education Ministers and the Panel. The MRG includes teachers, students, parent organisations, education unions, and other education experts and stakeholders.

1.4 A national approach to delivering on common goals that can advance every student at every school

The Mparntwe Education Declaration, signed by all Education Ministers, sets out two education goals for Australia which remain relevant: (1) the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity, and (2) all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.

The Mparntwe Education Declaration demonstrates Australia's aspiration for a world-class education system, and for many students it delivers. However, while there are many examples of excellence in Australian education, there are still too many students who are left behind in their learning.

Excellence in education should enable all students to achieve their ambitions and realise their potential. The delivery of an excellent education needs to be attuned to the needs of students from all backgrounds, including First Nations students, students with disability, students in regional, rural and remote areas, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from a non-English speaking background. To do this means supporting education systems and schools to implement evidence-based practice consistently and to learn from one another.

Schools where students achieve regardless of their circumstance or background tend to have a number of features in common.

- They pursue an explicit improvement agenda – they know what they want to see improve and they know how they will monitor success.
- The staff of the school work together as a team, supporting each other and sharing a clear focus on supporting quality teaching and learning in the school.
- Efforts are made to identify and understand the learning needs of students in the school and to use available human and physical resources to address those needs.
- The school builds relationships with parents and others outside the school in support of its improvement agenda.[4]

Targets and reforms in the next NSRA should be based on the best available evidence. This evidence needs to include a solid understanding of what works in successful education systems and how to implement reforms effectively. Evidence-based initiatives should clearly demonstrate their impact on student outcomes, with accountability for effective delivery at both the system level (e.g. Approved Authority – see section 6.2) and the school level. Student outcomes should encompass the foundational knowledge and both generic and specific skills students are expected to develop each year to be able to engage in the curriculum, as well as key achievement and attainment milestones within and beyond school.

Every student should be supported as a whole person and enabled to meet their potential by having their learning needs met. Education should be inclusive and delivered in a culturally responsive manner. It should achieve equity across all schools, recognising the needs of all students. Finally, appropriate measures of success should be clearly defined, while leveraging existing data.

The Panel considers that the next NSRA should contain reforms and targets which focus attention and investment on priority areas. The ambition needs to be clearly stated through firm targets and reform priorities. Achieving these targets and reforms may require tailored responses across and within jurisdictions. This tailored approach would need to be matched by stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure all parties to the agreement are delivering on the shared ambition. This recognises that individual education systems may have needs that are unique to their schools, students and communities.

Importantly, the goal of accountability is not to reduce funding for underperforming schools but to better identify and implement reforms to improve student outcomes.

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4.   Seifert and Hartnell-Young 2015, p. 1.

Chapter 2: Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

2.1 Equity and excellence

2.1.1 Defining equity and excellence in education

The OECD makes clear that equity and excellence are interconnected, stating that 'the highest performing education systems across OECD countries combine quality with equity'.[5] The Panel places equity and excellence at the core of its approach to improving student outcomes.

Although 'equity' is a commonly referenced goal in education policies, it remains poorly defined, with a wide range of interpretations. Educational equity is often described using terms such as fairness, inclusion, social justice, non-discrimination and equal opportunity. These are all important principles in developing education, but they do not provide a guide for what equity means in policy and practice. In the absence of a common definition of educational equity, it is difficult to make much progress.

The Panel supports the Productivity Commission's description of equity as involving two distinct concepts. According to the Productivity Commission:

> The first is to ensure schooling equips each student with the basic skills required for success in life (equity in minimum or basic skills). The second is to reduce or eliminate differences in outcomes across students with different backgrounds, experiences and needs (equity across students), particularly for the 'priority equity cohorts' in the NSRA – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.[6]

The Panel considers that a system that delivered equity and excellence would be evident in a greater proportion of students achieving at the highest levels of academic performance, and the likelihood of being a high achiever not being predicted by the level of socio-economic advantage that a student has in their household, school or community.

2.1.2 Excellence and equity in education is critical for individuals and the nation

Excellence and equity are important because of their capacity to help Australia deliver on key national values and aspirations – to leave no-one behind, to be fair, and to ensure that individuals and the nation at large benefit from the fully realised potential of all its people.

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5. OECD 2012, p. 37.
6. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 18.

For individuals, improved educational outcomes have a well-documented positive impact on a range of lifetime social, health, employment and income benefits.[7] For example:

- People who complete secondary school have, on average, annual incomes 14 per cent higher[8] and are less likely to be unemployed compared to people who do not complete secondary school.[9]

- Proficiency in foundation skills such as literacy and numeracy underpin a student's ability to learn and succeed at school, as well as having significant implications for health, employment, social inclusion and equality outcomes into adulthood.[10]

- At a society-level the economic and social benefits of educational excellence and equity are high, including greater innovation and productivity, economic resilience, social stability, and the capacity to respond to current and future crises.[11]

2.2 Australia's education system performs well for many but not for all

Overall, Australia has a robust and effective education system that is comparable to or exceeds the performance of many education systems across the OECD.[12] However, looking at averages masks important differences in student outcomes.

There are persistent challenges for particular groups of students who face historical, cultural and systemic barriers that hinder their ability to reach their full learning potential.

The current NSRA identifies particular cohorts of students who are more likely to encounter systemic barriers within the education system that make them less likely to achieve strong educational outcomes.[13] These are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.[14]

In its review of the current NSRA, the Productivity Commission identified other students who are likely to face significant barriers that impact their educational outcomes. These are students in out-of-home care, some students with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), students from refugee backgrounds, and students in the youth justice systems.[15]

The Panel notes that it does not view students who belong to these equity cohorts as being *intrinsically disadvantaged* based on who they are. The Panel recognises that many students within particular equity cohorts achieve excellent educational outcomes across a range of measures and find the assumption that equity cohort status implies disadvantage to be an educational barrier in and of itself – one that promotes a culture of deficit

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7.   Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2019.
8.   Productivity Commission 2022, p. 54.
9.   Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2019.
10.   Australian Education Research Organisation 2023b; Productivity Commission 2014, p. 2; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020, p. 175. The Commonwealth Government's Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program (https://www.dewr.gov.au/foundation-skills) also has a focus on foundation skills, which 'can have a direct and positive impact on [participants'] future economic and social wellbeing'.
11.   OECD 2012.
12.   OECD 2012.
13.   Productivity Commission 2022, p. 53.
14.   There is no definition for 'educationally disadvantaged background' in the NSRA and no agreed definition in the literature. In this paper, 'students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds' is taken to mean students with parents with low levels of educational attainment, as this is reported in NAPLAN datasets.
15.   The Productivity Commission also noted that outcomes for these students are currently difficult to monitor due to data limitations. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 63.

discourse and low expectations.[16] This is particularly true for First Nations students, many students with disability and some migrant groups. The characteristics that place a student in an equity cohort can be a source of pride and strength for some, and unimportant to others.

The Panel considers that every young Australian is worthy of the greatest respect. The education system should provide the support all students require to succeed, while being careful not to introduce additional forms of disadvantage through the design of the education system itself.

2.3 How are Australian students performing?

The performance of Australia's education system is assessed and reported on against various metrics in the three areas of student achievement, participation and attainment. As discussed in Chapter 6, there are significant data gaps (particularly for equity cohorts and certain learning domains) and inconsistencies in how jurisdictions collect and report data, resulting in imperfect knowledge of how the current education system is serving particular students.

However, too many students are starting school behind or are falling behind in minimum literacy and numeracy standards. Analysis also shows that students from priority equity cohorts – such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds – are three times more likely to fall below minimum standards.[17] Concerningly, the learning gap between those in equity cohorts and other students increases over time, meaning that, on average, these students not only stay behind their peers but also fall further behind.[18]

The evidence suggests that the learning outcomes of students who are behind, falling behind or at risk of falling behind are negatively influenced in schools with higher concentrations of students experiencing educational disadvantage. For example, students performing below minimum standards for the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) were less likely to be performing at or above the minimum standard two years later. Similarly, students from priority equity cohorts demonstrated less learning growth on average if they attended schools with higher concentrations of students experiencing educational disadvantage.[19]

2.3.1 Achievement data suggests core skills are improving in some domains and year levels but not in others, and inequality is entrenched

While there are different ways of measuring student academic performance, a key one is standardised literacy and numeracy testing. Domestically, Australia has measured its performance annually through the NAPLAN.

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16. In their submission to the NSRA Report, the Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting noted: '[The] labelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families as disadvantaged continues to play into a culture of deficit discourse and low expectations that stymie Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to thrive in their education … while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities face a range of complex and compounding circumstances that impact their educational engagement and outcomes, they are not inherently disadvantaged by being Indigenous'. Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting 2022, p. 3.
17. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 21.
18. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 66.
19. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 17.

Table 1: Percentage of students at or below the national minimum standards – NAPLAN 2022

Year level	3	5	7	9
Numeracy	16.3%	17.9%	20.6%	20.4%
Reading	13.0%	12.7%	16.9%	25.1%

Source: ACARA *NAPLAN National Report (www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/naplan-national-report)*

As shown in Table 1, the proportion of students who perform at or below the national minimum standard tends to increase as students progress through school.[20] Significant achievement gaps exist for specific equity cohorts, and these gaps get wider as students move through school.

Figure 1: Achievement gaps between high-SES* and low-SES students
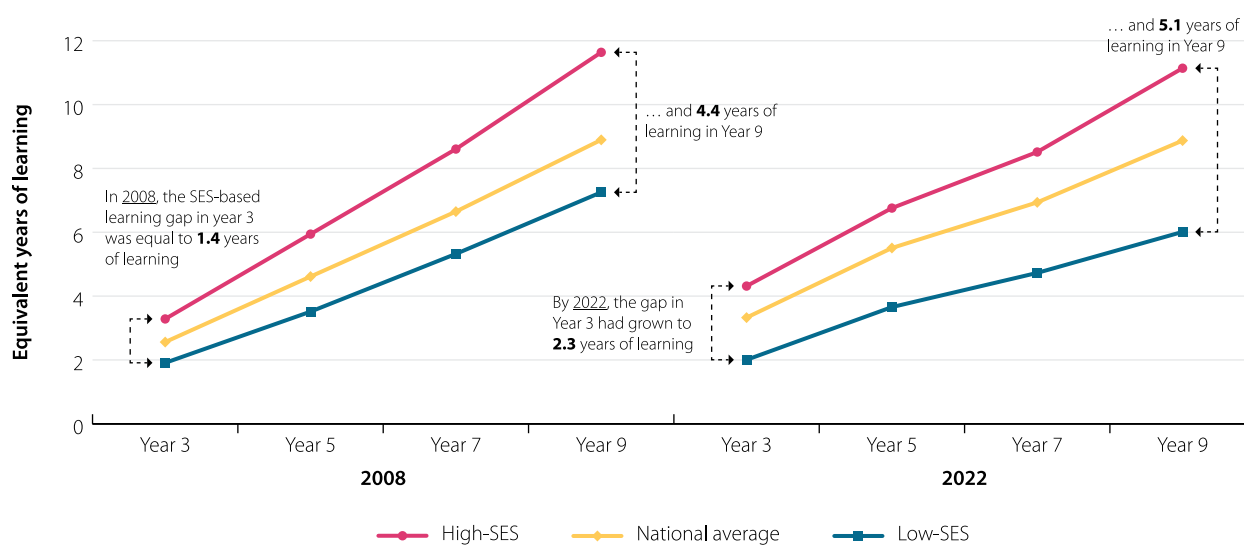
Source: *Department of Education analysis of NAPLAN 2008–2022 (NAPLAN data accessible via ACARA, National Report on Schooling Data Portal. (www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia) [21])*

* SES = socio-economic status

As shown in Figure 1, reading skills for eight-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds have improved over the past 15 years; however, the learning gap is still widening between these students and students from advantaged backgrounds. For example, in 2008 the gap between high and low socio-economic status (SES) Year 3 students was 1.4 years, but it had increased to 2.3 years by 2022.

The learning gap is also pronounced for First Nations students. For First Nations students, the Year 9 reading gap is over three years, compared to the average for non-First Nations Year 9 students.[22] There is also significant variation within the First Nations student cohort. By Year 9, average NAPLAN reading results for First Nations students who attend school in remote areas are 13 months behind the average for all other First Nations students. Similarly, by Year 9, average reading results for First Nations students whose parents have low educational attainment are nine months behind the average for other First Nations students.[23]

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20. The Panel notes that from 2023, students will be assessed against new measures of proficiency in the NAPLAN assessments, providing a clearer picture of the proportion of students who are on track with their learning in key domains. ACARA 2023b.
21. Reading data is used to illustrate. Parental education is used as a proxy for SES. High SES is considered as parents with a bachelor's degree or higher. Low-SES is considered as parents who did not complete Year 12.
22. Australian Education Research Organisation 2023b, p. 34.
23. Productivity Commission 2022.

It is important to note that although NAPLAN tests are intended to be taken by every Australian student in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, not all students sit the tests. Students from remote and very remote locations, students with lower levels of parental education, and First Nations students have rates of participation much lower than the average. Lower than desired participation in NAPLAN can reduce the effectiveness of NAPLAN as an accurate and reflective assessment of student performance in priority equity cohorts.[24]

Australia also measures student performance through participation in international assessments. These include:

- the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge. Australia remains a relatively high performer in PISA, although it has experienced a significant decline in PISA scores since its first participation in 2000, particularly in mathematics.[25] In 2018, over two in five Australian students fell short of Australia's proficiency standard in each of PISA's three domains.

- the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which assesses mathematics and science knowledge at the Year 4 and Year 8 levels. Recent results (2019) were mixed: Australia's average performance has improved, but we remain well behind the leading country, Singapore, and we have not reduced the proportion of students with low achievement (20 to 30 per cent of students not meeting the minimum standard, varying by year level and domain).[26]

- the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which measures reading achievement in Year 4. Gains in Australia's average performance between 2011 and 2016 were sustained but not improved on in the five years to 2021. In 2021, 20 per cent of students did not meet Australia's proficiency standard in PIRLS (compared with only 14 per cent in England, and 8 per cent in the leading country, Hong Kong).[27]

These assessments tell a picture of broadly improving performance in primary school but stagnating or declining performance in the secondary sector. International assessment indicates that the proportion of low achievers is growing and that there has been no progress in reducing the achievement range, with average student performance for equity cohorts remaining behind the Australian average for all students.

2.3.2 Student attendance has been declining over time and COVID exacerbated pre-existing issues

Student participation and engagement is critical for learning. Because it is difficult to measure, the reporting metrics focus on observable behaviours such as attendance rates and levels. Attendance levels are measured as the proportion of students in Years 1–10 attending school for at least 90 per cent of the time in semester 1.[28]

School attendance in Australia has been in steady decline since at least 2015, when this measure was first adopted. In 2015, 77.8 per cent of students attended school at least 90 per cent of the time but by 2019, attendance levels had declined to 73.1 per cent. Attendance for First Nations students was significantly lower at 49.2 per cent in 2015, declining to 46.9 per cent in 2019. COVID-19 precipitated further declines, with national attendance levels dropping to 71.2 per cent in 2021 and to 49.9 per cent in 2022 (with First Nations levels at 41.3 per cent and 26.6 per cent in 2021 and 2022 respectively).[29] In addition to declining attendance rates, high school retention rates dropped from 84.8 per cent to 80.5 per cent between 2017 and 2022, demonstrating less student engagement in education.[30]

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24.   Australian Education Research Organisation 2023c, p. 11.
25.   OECD 2023.
26.   Thomson et al. 2019.
27.   Hillman et a.l 2023.
28.   Attendance rate is defined as the number of actual full-time equivalent student days attended by full-time students in Years 1–10 as a percentage of the total number of possible student days attended over the period. Attendance level is defined as the proportion of full-time students in Years 1–10 whose attendance rate in semester 1 is equal to or greater than 90 per cent. ACARA, National Report on Schooling Data Portal (https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia).
29.   ACARA 2022c.
30.   ACARA 2022a.

2.3.3 Educational attainment has increased but there is room for improvement

The current measure of educational attainment is defined as completing Year 12 or gaining a non-school qualification at Certificate III level or above. The average attainment has steadily increased from 80 per cent in 2004 to 90 per cent in 2022.[31]

However, there is a pronounced gap in high school attainment rates. In 2017, 83 per cent of students from high socio-economic backgrounds completed high school; by 2021 this had risen to 84.8 per cent. However, for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, the rate was 76 per cent in 2017 and fell to 74 per cent by 2021.[32]

The Productivity Commission Closing the Gap Dashboard reports that the target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attaining Year 12 or equivalent to 96 per cent is improving but not on track. The attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students narrowed from 33.5 percentage points in 2011 to 22.6 percentage points in 2021, driven by fast gains in Indigenous attainment (rising from 51.8 per cent in 2011 to 68.1 per cent in 2021).[33] While the increase is promising, the 2021 figure remains short of the 74.1 per cent required to be on track to meeting the 2030 target.

Considerable work remains to reach the attainment target, particularly for remote First Nations students. The proportion of First Nations people aged 20 to 24 who have attained Year 12 or equivalent is highest in major cities (75.9 per cent in 2021) and declines as remoteness increases (41.7 per cent in 2021 for First Nations people living in very remote areas).[34]

2.4 What contributes to poor performance?

2.4.1 Australia's schools are highly segregated along socio-economic lines

In Australia, 51 per cent of students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage attend schools with students from similar backgrounds. This is one of the highest concentrations in the OECD, and disadvantage is rapidly becoming more concentrated.[35]
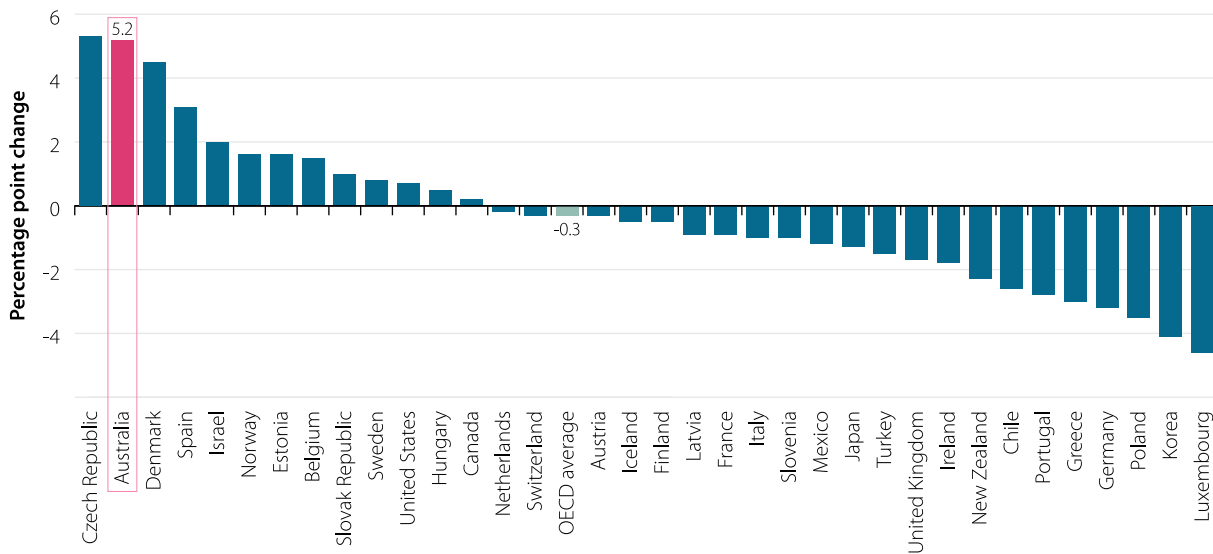
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31.   ACARA 2022b.
32.   ACARA 2021.
33.   Productivity Commission 2020b.
34.   Productivity Commission 2021.
35.   OECD 2018a.

Figure 2: Australia's concentration of disadvantaged students is increasing at the second fastest rate in the OECD

Reducing the concentration of disadvantage in Australian schools could produce better outcomes, as a student's results are often improved when surrounded by higher performing students. OECD analysis suggests that students experiencing disadvantage who attend advantaged schools score 86 points higher in PISA science testing, the equivalent of three years of school, than their peers experiencing disadvantage who attend disadvantaged schools.[36] Similar effects can be seen in NAPLAN results. Further analysis is needed to identify the full impact on student learning of concentrations of disadvantage in the Australian education system.

2.4.2 Intersectionality and compounding disadvantage is a challenge for some

Some students face multiple educational barriers related to their individual characteristics, circumstances and background. This means there is often overlap between priority equity cohort groups, which can further compound these barriers. For example, students with disability often present with comorbidities, and the prevalence of some disorders is correlated with a range of socio-demographic characteristics.[37] The National Agreement on Closing the Gap also notes that First Nations people experience disability at much higher rates, which can compound educational disadvantage for First Nations students.[38]

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36. OECD 2018b
37. Deloitte Access Economics 2019.
38. NSW data provided to the Disability Royal Commission shows that exclusionary discipline rates compound for First Nations students with disability (i.e., higher rates of expulsion for students with disability and First Nations students compared with other students – but much higher rates for First Nations students with disability compared to other students with disability or First Nation students without disability).

2.4.3 Learning gaps emerge early and widen over time

Evidence indicates that students who do not meet age-appropriate learning outcomes tend to remain on that trajectory throughout their schooling, unless they are identified early and receive appropriate intervention support. AERO analysis shows that if a student who has been identified as falling behind does not catch up by Year 5, they are less likely to have future learning success and instead fall further behind.[39] This demonstrates the value of timely and targeted learning interventions to identify students falling behind and support them to catch up as early as possible in their schooling.

2.4.4 Out-of-school factors

School-specific factors account for about 40 to 50 per cent of the variability in student achievement.[40] It is clear that schools cannot fix existing education inequities alone.

A multitude of out-of-school factors are strongly associated with learning outcomes. They include student background factors such as socio-economic status, income, health (including mental health) status and access to support services; lifestyle factors such as exercise, sleep, and nutrition; and innate skills, interests and attributes. Factors in the immediate environment such as levels of parental/carer engagement, peer relations and community environment, as well as exposure to adverse experiences such as racism, stigma and discrimination, home care arrangements, trauma, contact with the justice system and family and domestic violence are among the most complex but influential drivers of educational outcomes.[41]

These factors are generally outside schools' control and indicate limits to what schools are able – and should be expected – to do. On the other hand, schools have an obligation to support student learning regardless of students' personal circumstances or background characteristics. To do this well, schools need to have systems in place to identify and address students' additional needs where possible, and the ability to connect students to appropriate services, resources and communities to address other barriers that prevent students from reaching their potential.

2.4.5 Quality teaching and curriculum resources

Quality teaching is the most important in-school factor affecting student learning.[42] Evidence-based instructional practices, supported by a well-designed and well-delivered curriculum, are key to meeting Australia's goal of excellent and equitable learning outcomes for all students.

Research by the Productivity Commission and the Grattan Institute suggests that evidence-based small group tuition can improve learning outcomes in reading and numeracy by up to four months.[43] Small group tuition involves a trained teacher, teaching assistant or tutor working with a small group of students to provide an 'additional dose' of instruction and more focused attention, with greater opportunities for interaction and feedback, to help students catch up to their peers.

These programs are most effective when integrated into a whole-school approach to high-quality teaching, where the curriculum focus and instructional practices used in the small group tutoring environment are reinforced in the classroom. An example of this is the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model, which includes a school-wide, multi-level system of instruction; high-quality classroom instruction; universal student screening; evidence-based interventions provided on a sliding scale of intensity; and continuous, data-based progress monitoring. This model supports individual students' learning needs, including the needs of those

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39. AERO 2023.
40. Hattie 2003.
41. Productivity Commission 2022, Figure 5.1.
42. Hattie 2003.
43. Productivity Commission 2022; Sonnemann and Hunter 2023.

who are falling behind or at risk of falling behind (Tier 3 and Tier 2). Evidence also suggests that high-quality Tier 1 instruction is suitable for approximately 80 per cent of students, including students who are performing well, and may assist them in reaching higher levels of student achievement.

A successful MTSS model requires quality classroom instruction. As the Grattan Institute has noted, quality teaching in the classroom relies heavily on high-quality curriculum materials and planning which carefully sequences the teaching of key knowledge and skills across subjects and year levels. A coordinated whole-school approach to curriculum planning and delivery is necessary to give students the best chance of developing deep knowledge and skills mastery over time.[44] Many teachers face significant challenges in developing high-quality materials on their own, given workload challenges, the need for deep subject matter knowledge and curriculum expertise, and the need for a whole-school approach.

One answer to this could be for governments to increase the availability of comprehensive, quality-assured curriculum and assessment materials that schools could choose to adopt. Teachers could use their professional judgement to determine how to use or adapt these materials to their classroom and students.

High-quality resources and curriculum materials should promote inclusion of First Nations students, by authentically and respectfully referencing First Nations perspectives and ways of learning. This would enable teachers and all students to learn about, acknowledge and respect the First Nations histories and cultures, increasing cultural competence.[45]

Assessment also matters because it helps establish frameworks to identify students who require additional tiers of support and further develops the evidence base around which types of interventions are most effective for particular student needs.

Quality pedagogical[46] approaches also depend on the knowledge and skills of the teacher. These are dependent on the training and mentorship that they receive in their initial teacher education (ITE) program, in the induction and mentoring provided at the beginning their career, and in their ongoing, professional development. The advice from the TEEP on strengthening ITE to equip teaching graduates with evidence-based teaching practices will be considered by Education Ministers in July 2023. The next NSRA could consider the recommendations from the TEEP and other levers to drive the uptake of evidence-based pedagogical models in the classroom.

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44.   Hunter, Haywood and Parkinson 2022.
45.   AITSL 2020, p.16.
46.   Pedagogy refers to how the curriculum is taught. It encompasses the nature and purpose of effective learning, as well as interactions between teachers, students, the learning environment and learning tasks. Warring and Evans 2014

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2.4.6 Learning environment

The school and classroom learning environment can have a significant impact on education outcomes.[47]

Safety (encompassing cultural, psychological and physical aspects) and belonging are recognised factors that are critical to wellbeing (see Chapter 3), but they are also prerequisites to learning.

Students who do not engage with classroom learning or who are disruptive in class are more likely to perform poorly in reading and numeracy than their more productive peers.[48] Analysis of NAPLAN has shown that a Year 7 student who is attentive in class could be six months ahead in their learning by Year 9, compared to a student who is disruptive or breaks school rules.[49] Evidence also shows that disruption in classrooms can negatively impact the learning outcomes of other students.[50] AERO analysis has found that classroom management maximises students' on-task learning time by minimising disruptive behaviour and disengagement.[51] Evidence also shows that a productive learning environment that reduces classroom disruption may benefit students' sense of belonging at school.[52]

A number of jurisdictions have implemented programs like Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), an evidence-based approach to creating a safe and positive learning environment. The effectiveness of these learning environment models is highly dependent on the fidelity of implementation at a school and classroom level.[53]

2.5 The role of the next NSRA in improving student outcomes

The next NSRA could contain targets and reforms centred on improving student outcomes, particularly for students in equity cohorts, those who start school behind, and those who fall behind. The Panel is seeking your views on what these targets and reforms should be.

The next NSRA could have targets and reforms to include additional indicators, to deliver learning interventions for students and to provide effective support for students in need. Targets in the next NSRA should link to the commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031.

The success of reforms will be contingent on improving parental and community engagement, especially where the needs being addressed require a culturally responsive or multidisciplinary approach. As recognised in the Closing the Gap Agreement, enhancing partnership and empowering local decision-making is essential to lifting outcomes for First Nations students. But the principle of engagement would likely benefit other students too. Previous and current approaches, such as the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program and co-design models being trialled in jurisdictions, could be considered as mechanisms to support reform and increase the likelihood of success.

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47. OECD 2012.
48. Angus et al. 2010.
49. CESE 2017.
50. Angus et al. 2010.
51. AERO 2021.
52. OECD 2017.
53. Poed and Whitefield 2020 (citing Pas and Bradshaw 2012).

Questions

1. What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?

2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?

3. How can all students at risk of falling behind be identified early on to enable swift learning interventions?

4. Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?

5. What should the specific targets in the next NSRA be? Should the targets be different for primary and secondary schools? If so, how? What changes are required to current measurement frameworks, and what new measures might be required?

6. How can the targets in the next NSRA be structured to ensure that evidence-based approaches underpin a nationally coherent reform agenda while allowing jurisdictions and schools the flexibility to respond to individual student circumstances and needs?

7. How should progress towards any new targets in the next NSRA be reported on?

Chapter 3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing

3.1 Students' mental health and wellbeing impacts their learning ability

3.1.1 Good mental health and wellbeing is the ability to participate in life and cope with its challenges

As noted in Chapter 2, mental health and wellbeing is linked to proficiency in the foundational skills that underpin an individual's ability to succeed at school and beyond.

The terms 'mental health' and 'wellbeing' are often used together and sometimes interchangeably. While there are clinical definitions of 'mental health', the Panel considers that for the purpose of discussion about mental health and wellbeing in a school context, 'good mental health and wellbeing' refers to a state of social, psychological and emotional wellbeing where a student has the resilience, skills and capacity to deal with life's usual stressors and meaningfully participate in their daily life, including the learning and social opportunities afforded through their education.

This concept of mental health and wellbeing centres around an ecological model of the child, where mental health and wellbeing is influenced by various risk and protective factors within the child's environment, their developmental progress, and their biology. It is important to note that 'mental health and wellbeing' exists on a continuum and that while people will inevitably have times of greater stress or challenge, a person with good mental health and wellbeing will be able to meet these challenges by using skills such as perseverance and self-management and by seeking outside assistance and support.

3.1.2 Learning and wellbeing are inextricably linked

Students with good social and emotional wellbeing are more engaged with learning and tend to have higher levels of academic achievement and attainment.[54] Conversely, poor wellbeing can negatively affect students' ability to learn, their social interactions at school, and their ability to engage.[55] Stakeholder submissions to and consultations with young people as part of the Productivity Commission's review of the NSRA underscore these findings.

Data indicates that students experiencing poor mental health have double the number of absent days and by Year 9 are on average 1.5 years to two years behind in literacy and numeracy outcomes.[56] Research has also shown a significant association between literacy and mental health outcomes, indicating that people with poor literacy are more likely to suffer poor mental health such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety.[57]

Hence, a positive learning and wellbeing relationship creates a virtuous cycle in which wellbeing supports learning and development, which in turn reinforces good mental health and wellbeing. However, students who struggle significantly with learning gaps that are not addressed can face declining mental health outcomes, which in turn can undermine future learning.

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54. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 139; Noble and Wyatt 2010, p. 67.
55. Centre for Community Child Health 2022; Save the Children 2022; National Catholic Education Commission 2022.
56. Goodsell et al. 2017.
57. Hunn et al. 2023.

To this end, wellbeing and learning cannot be decoupled. Positive outcomes in one are essential for positive outcomes in the other.

3.1.3 Schools play an important part in the wellbeing of students, particularly when it comes to belonging

School is the key environment beyond the home for nearly all Australian children. Experiences of school can be either a risk factor or a protective factor for a child's mental health and wellbeing, and the impacts – in either direction – can be significant. Schools that support good mental health and wellbeing are not only meeting their duty of care requirements but also delivering the environment required for students to learn.

However, this is not to say that good mental health and wellbeing is the sole responsibility of schools, or that schools are solely responsible for the mental health and wellbeing of their students. Given the broad risk and protective factors at play, there are many aspects of student mental health and wellbeing that need to be addressed outside the school gates. But, given that schools are a near-universal touchpoint for Australian children and adolescents, schools can play an important role in creating safe and inclusive environments that promote good mental health and wellbeing. Schools are also uniquely placed to identify students who may require support and refer them on appropriately[58] and are an important window for early intervention, given that many mental health issues emerge in childhood and adolescence.[59]

This role of schools – focused on student belonging, safety and inclusion – is broadly accepted, as demonstrated by the many recommendations, programs and frameworks that have been developed in Australia to support student mental health and wellbeing outcomes. AERO's research shows many examples across the country of schools that are doing this well – usually because of school structures and policies that facilitate connectedness between students and the school, and committed school leaders and teachers.[60]

3.2 Poor mental health and wellbeing is a growing issue

3.2.1 Poor mental health and wellbeing affects a number of children, but impacts some cohorts more than others

The Productivity Commission noted, based on the limited data available, concerning rates of poor health and wellbeing among Australian children and young people, with as many as one in five experiencing poor social and emotional wellbeing.[61]

The Young Minds Matter survey found that one in seven children aged four to 11 had a mental health disorder and that only half of these children received support services in the previous 12 months.[62] As this data is now a decade old, it is likely that the prevalence of mental health disorders has increased, consistent with the overarching trend for the Australian population.[63]

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58. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 138.
59. Productivity Commission 2020a, p. 193.
60. Australian Education Research Organisation 2023a.
61. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 71.
62. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020.
63. Data from the 2020–21 National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing found an increase in mental health disorder prevalence in Australians aged 16 to 85 when compared with the data from the previous study taken in 2007.

Furthermore, young people are reporting that mental health and wellbeing is a concern and among the biggest challenges in their lives – alongside their education. In Mission Australia's 2022 Youth Survey of 18,800 people aged 15 to 19:

- mental health came in as the third most important issue, after the environment and equity and discrimination

- 41.5 per cent reported that school challenges (including academic pressure, high workload, challenges with teachers, and learning difficulties) were their top personal challenge

- 27.7 per cent identified mental health (including stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and self-harm) as the next biggest personal challenge, ahead of relationship issues (19.7 per cent).

Poor mental health and wellbeing can also be more pronounced for students who experience challenges in engagement and inclusion in school. This includes students in out of home care[64] and priority equity cohorts such as students from low socio-economic backgrounds, those in rural and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.[65] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and more (LGBTQIA+) students are also highly vulnerable, frequently experiencing negative or hostile school environments, bullying and discrimination,[66] which contributes to poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

Bullying in schools, and associated cyber bullying, is also a key contributor to poor student mental health and wellbeing outcomes. It can lead to emotional and physical harm, loss of self-esteem, feelings of shame and anxiety, and concentration and learning difficulties.[67] In Australia it is estimated that one in four children have experienced some form of bullying, with one in five Year 4 students experiencing bullying on a weekly basis.[68]

3.3 Jurisdictions, systems, sectors and schools are all acting to support student wellbeing, but challenges remain

All governments have made substantial investments in student mental health and wellbeing initiatives, including well-established programs focused on early intervention and primary care in schools. These can include in-house supports such as coordinators, school wellbeing leaders and dedicated non-teaching staff, as well as in-house or externally accessible resources such as referral pathways to allied community and health services, school counsellors and psychologists. In addition, both governments and the private sector have developed resources such as online information hubs, programs and surveys to help schools support their students. Many of these initiatives have been developed by jurisdictions, given their primary role in education delivery.

While this indicates substantial goodwill and reflects a shared understanding of the importance of student mental health and wellbeing, stakeholders have described the current landscape as cluttered, fragmented and difficult to navigate. Stakeholders also expressed the need for simple decision-making supports and greater guidance on appropriate interventions and how they should be accessed, implemented and evaluated. Furthermore, despite the expectation that schools play a greater role in supporting student mental health and wellbeing, the allocation of resources can often take place via blanket approaches based on student numbers that do not reflect the complexity of individual schools or the level of support needed (often more than monthly or weekly access).

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64. National Mental Health Commission 2022, p. 3.
65. Australian Early Development Census 2022, *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021: Early Childhood Development in Australia*, p. 31, 35, 41 – results show increases in the numbers of developmentally vulnerable or at-risk children from these cohorts in the domain of physical health and wellbeing.
66. Russell et al. 2021.
67. Australian Human Rights Commission n.d.
68. Holt n.d.; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2015, p. 176.

3.3.1 Supports for teachers and schools

The Productivity Commission inquiry into mental health (2020) identified a number of challenges with the delivery of mental health and wellbeing supports in schools:

- Teachers feeling overloaded by the expectation that they solve students' social and emotional issues
- Overlapping policies and programs for schools (not all of which were evidence based)
- Lack of teacher training to support wellbeing
- Variation in adjustments for students with social-emotional disability
- Incoherent pathways for support within schools, and blurred responsibilities among school staff.

Other issues include lack of skills, training and planning for wellbeing initiatives, no clear guidance or capacity to implement them, continuing stigma (and self-stigma), and little transparency on student outcomes. Educators also frequently report barriers to accessing services that support students' health.[69]

The mental health and wellbeing of teachers is also a key issue. The Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health reported that teachers report feeling overwhelmed and under-supported in managing student mental health and wellbeing challenges.[70] For school leaders, poor student mental health was one of the top four sources of stress in 2019 and 2020.[71]

3.3.2 Lack of reliable and consistent data to assess which interventions work

Most states and territories collect data on and measure a variety of student wellbeing domains. However, approaches and methodologies are highly variable, making it inherently difficult to measure changes in wellbeing and intervention outcomes over time and between jurisdictions. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare analysis indicates that while Commonwealth data alone provides a solid foundation for national reporting on children's wellbeing more broadly, it also contains key gaps, including data for education settings and disaggregated data for sub-populations such as culturally and linguistically diverse groups, students with disability, and students by socio-economic status.[72]

At a macro level, the last survey of Australian child and adolescent mental health was undertaken in 2013–14; there is a need for more up-to-date data and regular data collection to support a population-level understanding of mental health for school-aged Australians and contribute to evidence-based interventions.

The lack of shared understanding of definitions, indicators and measures means there is no comprehensive national set of data and information on student health and wellbeing. This makes it difficult to evaluate whether current interventions and investments are effective. The Productivity Commission concluded that there is a strong in-principle case for developing a national wellbeing indicator, especially if governments elect to include wellbeing as an outcome of the next intergovernmental agreement.[73]

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69. Smith et al. 2021.
70.   Productivity Commission, 2020a, p. 216.
71.   See et. al 2002, p. 21.
72. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019.
73. Productivity Commission 2022.

3.4 The role of the next NSRA in supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools

There is an opportunity for the next NSRA to improve broader outcomes of schooling by taking a more systemic view of the links between students' wellbeing and learning outcomes. There is scope for better coordination and consistency across and within school systems to help improve wellbeing outcomes for students and foster a longer-term, preventive approach to mental health and wellbeing more broadly.

3.4.1 Training and resources to support student wellbeing

The next NSRA offers the opportunity to improve the capacity of schools to implement evidence-based interventions to support student mental health and wellbeing. Beyond training and resources for individual educators, this could also include resources such as non-teaching staff; improvements to the accreditation and endorsement of programs and resources; and simple, clear guidelines to support correct implementation of programs or referral pathways.[74] There is also the potential to better align the NSRA with approaches across government portfolios, such as the three reform areas put forward by the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy: a wellbeing culture, targeted responses and well-equipped educators.[75]

More work is also needed to ensure comprehensive access to (and appropriate delivery of) programs and frameworks that work for particular student cohorts, such as First Nations students or students with disability.[76] The next NSRA is an opportunity to ensure wellbeing-focused targets and reforms align with the Closing the Gap Agreement's ambitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. First Nations models of social and emotional wellbeing are holistic and centred on identity. It may be useful to consider applying these models more broadly to benefit all students.[77]

3.4.2 Improving data and reporting

To ensure that the next NSRA can support meaningful improvements in student mental health and wellbeing, we need a shared understanding of national wellbeing indicators to enable targets and outcomes to be tracked over time. However, as noted in section 3.1.1, a range of different approaches to defining, measuring and evaluating wellbeing are in use.

It is also important that the next NSRA does not seek to 'reinvent the wheel' or overlook the significant efforts of schools and all governments to improve student mental health and wellbeing to date. There is an opportunity for the next NSRA to leverage these existing efforts, setting strong targets and outcomes for wellbeing while retaining the ability of jurisdictions to meet targets and deliver on outcomes using the interventions best suited to their needs and circumstances.

Key issues in setting national indicators are what and how to measure. For 'what', potential domains include sense of student safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption. For 'how', wellbeing interventions can measure processes (inputs) and/or subjective outcomes, but the latter can only be meaningfully measured with longitudinal data.

There is currently limited longitudinal data on wellbeing domains at the national level. An additional student survey on wellbeing and school climate, delivered as part of the annual NAPLAN assessments of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, could be an effective mechanism for collecting this information. However, assessing changes in these outcomes will not be possible for some time, as it requires a longitudinal dataset to be established.

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74. Productivity Commission 2020a.
75. National Mental Health Commission 2021.
76. Productivity Commission 2020a.
77. Productivity Commission 2022.

Questions

8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government and the community to deliver this?

9. What evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools and communities should be considered as part of a national reform agenda?

10. Should a wellbeing target be included in the next NSRA? Could this use existing data collections, or is additional data required?

11. Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?

12. To what extent do school leaders and teachers have the skills and training to support students struggling with mental health?

13. What can be done to establish stronger partnerships between schools, Local Health Networks and Primary Health Networks?

14. What can be done to ensure schools can easily refer students to services outside the school gate that they need to support their wellbeing? How can this be done without adding to teacher and leader workload?

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Chapter 4: Our current and future teachers

4.1 Attracting and retaining teachers is a critical issue

Teachers are the most influential in-school factor in student outcomes.[78] Ensuring an adequate supply of effective teachers is critical to improving student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind.

However, teacher supply is a global issue[79] and Australia is experiencing significant supply challenges influenced by increasing demand from a growing student population,[80] an ageing teacher and leadership workforce,[81] and declining ITE commencements and graduates.[82] Teacher supply challenges also exist within a context of broader workforce supply challenges across the Australian economy.

Australia has highly capable teachers; however, their role has increased in complexity and responsibility to meet modern social and economic needs and they may require additional support. There are currently significant attrition rates, with around one in five beginning teachers leaving within the first three years of entering the teaching profession[83] and 45 per cent of teachers aged 50 and over intending to leave the profession in the next five years.[84] Some segments of the teacher workforce are more likely to report plans to leave within 10 years. For example, 18 per cent of early career teachers and 17 per cent of inner regional teachers report this intention.[85]

Further, Australia is struggling to attract teachers into the profession. ITE commencements are declining and 37 per cent of those who commenced an ITE qualification in 2016 did not complete their studies within the first six years.[86]

Attracting and retaining highly competent school leaders is also critical.[87] School leaders, including principals, assistant principals and middle leaders, have increasingly complex roles. They are responsible for the educational leadership, management and accountability of schools. They are essential for establishing whole-school approaches to quality teaching, student engagement and school improvement.

Some schools find it more difficult to attract and retain skilled teachers and leaders. Hard to staff schools are often in rural, regional and remote locations and some are in areas with high levels of low socio-economic advantage.[88] The data suggests that supply and retention challenges disproportionately affect areas of educational disadvantage[89] and further increase challenges for teachers in these settings. Examples include increased instances of out-of-field teaching and higher workloads to cover for shortages.[90]

78. Hattie 2011.
79. UNESCO 2022.
80. Australian Government Department of Education's School Funding Model as at Budget 2023-24.
81. AITSL 2021.
82. Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics. (www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics)
83. Social Research Centre 2023a.
84. OECD 2020.
85. AITSL 2021.
86. Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics. (www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics)
87. Productivity Commission 2022.
88. Jo Lampert et.al. 2021.
89. OECD 2012.
90. Productivity Commission 2022.

Australia is also having difficulty attracting and retaining a teacher workforce that reflects the diversity of Australian communities, schools and student populations. There is a significant disparity between the percentage of teachers who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (2 per cent) and the percentage of students with that background (6 per cent).[91] A diverse teaching workforce helps provide a safe learning environment for students. Attendance and engagement is improved for First Nations students when schools are culturally responsive, cater for diverse student needs and provide a culturally safe learning environment that reflects their identity.

4.2 It is hard to attract new teachers, and many are leaving the profession early

Teaching is a specialist profession requiring high-quality training and development. Teachers perform a critical role in lifting student outcomes and supporting Australia's economy by teaching foundational skills and capabilities to the nation's future workforce. Teachers need to continuously update their practice to maintain the skills and expertise to meet the evolving educational needs of individual students and society.

However, many teachers are leaving the profession early. Teachers identify work/life balance, unsustainable and increasingly complex workloads, high levels of stress, impact on wellbeing or health, the demands of professional regulation, and changes imposed on schools from outside as key factors in leaving the workforce.[92] High workload continues to be the most significant stress factor identified by school leaders and teachers, with school leaders reporting that increasing workloads are affecting their health and wellbeing.[93] There is also preliminary evidence that teachers' levels of stress and wellbeing can influence student outcomes.[94]

In addition, 24.5 per cent of participants in Monash University's 2022 Teachers' Perceptions Survey reported feeling unsafe in their workplace.[95] The reasons cited for this include student behaviour and violence, parent abuse, and negative relationships with staff, including leaders.[96] Many First Nations teachers also feel their workplaces are culturally unsafe and have identified experiences of racism as contributing to teacher attrition.[97]

The Commonwealth Behavioural Economics Team (BETA) found that the perceived status of teachers and unfavourable working conditions were identified as deterrents for school leavers to enter the profession. They also found that the perception of low salary was a key deterrent for young high achievers to enter the profession. In 2022, starting salaries for teacher education graduates were the fourth highest in Australia;[98] however, many high achievers who chose a profession other than teaching underestimate both teachers' starting pay and teachers' top pay. BETA also found that even if young high achievers had accurate expectations of teachers' top salary, 56 per cent expected to earn more in their chosen career.[99]

91. Productivity Commission 2022.
92. AITSL 2023; AEU 2022; IEU 2022.
93. See et al. 2022.
94. Carroll et al 2021.
95. Longmuir et al 2022.
96. Longmuir et al 2022.
97. NSW Department of Education 2021.
98. Social Research Centre 2023b.
99. BETA 2022.

The final report of the QITE Review, *Next steps*, found that career progression was also a contributing factor for people choosing a career other than teaching.[100] The Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) certification is the primary mechanism in Australia for recognising highly skilled teachers. However, HALTs currently make up less than one per cent of the teaching workforce.[101] The *Next steps* also found that diverse cohorts may be deterred from entering the profession due to a lack of existing diversity in the workforce and concerns that they will not be welcomed.[102]

As well as attracting new teachers and retaining current teachers, there may be opportunities to attract those who have left teaching back into the profession. This is particularly important given the high level of investment that teachers have made in their professional qualifications to work as a teacher. To work in a classroom, teachers must not only complete a four-year undergraduate or two-year post-graduate education course but meet the requirements of the teacher registration authority in their jurisdiction. This may include a certain number of hours of professional development to maintain registration.

4.2.1 All states and territories are trying to attract more teachers

A number of initiatives have been implemented at national, state, territory and sector levels over a long period of time to attract more people to the profession. Many of these initiatives have little published evaluation, so there is uncertainty around their quality and their overall success in increasing the teacher workforce.

Traditionally jurisdictions, sectors, systems and schools have not worked at a national level to strategically address the attraction and retention of teachers. Recently there has been a more coordinated national effort to address teacher shortages through the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and the Australian Teacher Workforce Data collection initiative, which connects initial teacher education data and teacher workforce data from states and territories to improve the information available for teacher workforce planning at a national level.

Education Ministers released the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan in December 2022 to strengthen the profession. It includes actions to improve teacher supply, strengthen ITE, retain teachers already in the workforce and better understand workforce needs.[103] The plan includes $337.3 million in Commonwealth investment. Its initiatives include streamlining HALT processes, with a target of 10,000 HALTs by 2025; providing $56 million for 5,000 bursaries to help attract high-quality candidates into the teaching profession; and developing national guidelines to support early career teachers and new school leaders, including mentoring and induction.

State and territory governments also offer a range of financial incentives to attract people into ITE courses. Many provide alternative pathways into ITE, including fast-tracked ITE programs for prospective undergraduate students and mid-career changers undertaking postgraduate pathways. Most states and territories also offer financial incentives to attract existing teachers to work in hard to staff subjects or locations where teacher shortages are more severe.

Jurisdictions have also implemented initiatives that look to support teachers, including programs to reduce workload, increase class-planning time, increase permanent positions, and induction and mentoring initiatives.

The TEEP's advice to Education Ministers about reforms to ITE to assist in improving attraction and retention of teachers will be considered at the Education Ministers Meeting in July 2023. This includes strengthening ITE to deliver confident, effective, classroom-ready graduates and improving postgraduate ITE for mid-career entrants.[104]

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100. Paul et al. 2021.
101. AITSL 2022.
102. Paul et al. 2021.
103. Education Ministers Meeting 2022.
104. Teacher Education Expert Panel 2022.

4.3 The next NSRA could improve the working environment of teachers

Teacher workload is a key issue influencing the attractiveness of the profession. More can be done to support existing initiatives to address this issue.

The Grattan Institute's *Making time for great teaching* report noted that while governments have devoted attention to reducing onerous administration and paperwork in teachers' jobs, more attention should be given to helping teachers in core aspects of teaching work, such as curriculum planning.[105] It pointed to research suggesting that using high-quality shared curriculum resources could save teachers up to three hours a week, while also boosting learning outcomes for students.[106] Teachers may also benefit from reforms which provide them with additional scope for collaboration with colleagues to ensure classes are inclusive, effective and engaging for all students.

The Productivity Commission's *Review of the National School Reform Agreement* report also recommended creating a common bank of high-quality curriculum resources for teachers and school leaders to cut teacher workload and support quality teaching.[107] The Grattan Institute found that new curriculum resources should be comprehensive and be quality-assured by an independent body, so that teachers can have confidence that new materials are consistent with evidence-based practice, aligned to mandated curriculum frameworks and easy to use and adapt in the classroom.[108]

Digital technology has the capability to both enhance teacher effectiveness and expand education services in areas where teacher shortages are having an acute impact on student access and education delivery. An expanding body of evidence shows that high-quality 'edtech', when used in the right environment, can improve outcomes for disadvantaged students through better supporting teachers, earlier diagnosis of learning needs, and greater access to personalised learning.[109] For example, online learning platforms have been developed to assist teachers and students in delivering and accessing personalised learning using evidence-based teaching practices.

The Grattan Institute recommended restructuring teacher career paths to recognise expert teachers and give them clearly defined roles with greater responsibility by creating subject-specific 'Master Teacher' and 'Instructional Specialist' positions. These roles would build on the existing HALT frameworks to provide additional career progression for expert teachers and could help retain them in the classroom, where their knowledge and skills can be used more effectively to support and develop other teachers. Their expertise could also be recognised with additional remuneration commensurate with their increased role and responsibilities.[110]

As AITSL stated in its 2018 report *One teaching profession: teacher registration in Australia*, 'registration is one of the most important mechanisms to assure the safety, competency and quality of a profession. Its design is underpinned by a clear intent to set and uphold high standards of professional practice'.[111] National registration of teachers is one mechanism to enhance the status of teachers as high-quality registered professionals and better facilitate mobility of the teacher workforce, increasing its attractiveness as a profession.

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105. Hunter et al. 2022a.
106. Hunter et al. 2022b.
107. Productivity Commission 2022.
108. Hunter et al. 2022b.
109. Loble and Hawcroft 2022.
110. Goss and Sonnemann 2020.
111. Wardlaw et al. 2018, p. ii.

The Productivity Commission recommended that the next NSRA should include a commitment to identifying and eliminating racism and instituting cultural safety requirements.[112] All jurisdictions, as part of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, have committed to the development of a national First Nations teachers strategy. This strategy could look to address the cultural safety and inclusivity of teachers and school leaders, which could make the profession more attractive to First Nations people and contribute to greater diversity in the teacher workforce.

There may be opportunities to attract teachers who have left, back into the profession. The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan includes an action to create pathways for qualified teachers to return to the classroom, and Victoria's Tutor Learning Initiative encourages retired teachers to re-register with the Victorian Institute of Teaching.[113] There is also an opportunity to explore the barriers to maintaining teacher registration and professional development to encourage ex-teachers back into the profession.

Questions

15. What change(s) would attract more students into the teaching profession?
16. What change(s) would support teachers to remain in the profession?
17. What change(s) would support qualified teachers to return to the profession?
18. What additional reforms are needed to ensure that the schools most in need can support and retain highly effective teachers?
19. What can be done to attract a diverse group of people into the teaching profession to ensure it looks like the broader community?
20. What can be done to attract more First Nations teachers? What can be done to improve the retention of First Nations teachers?
21. What reforms could enable the existing teacher workforce to be deployed more effectively?
22. How can teacher career pathways, such as master teachers and instructional specialists, be improved to attract and retain teachers? How should this interact with HALT certification and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers?
23. Are there examples of resources, such as curriculum materials, being used to improve teacher workload or streamline their administrative tasks?
24. How should digital technology be used to support education delivery, reduce teacher workload and improve teacher effectiveness? What examples are you aware of?
25. Are there benefits for the teaching profession in moving to a national registration system? If so, what are they?

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112. Productivity Commission 2022.
113. Victorian Department of Education 2023.

Chapter 5: Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

5.1 Data collection and reporting can improve our understanding of system performance and help lift student outcomes

The collection and publication of data are critical pillars in holding all governments to account for their collective commitment to improve educational outcomes in Australia. Without the ability to track changes in outcomes, governments and the public are unable to determine the effectiveness of changes in policy or additional funding commitments. Publication of the data is important to support transparency and is the bedrock of enabling the public to hold governments to account.

Good data facilitates research on what works and what doesn't, creating an evidence base to support optimising resource allocation to get the best outcomes. As AERO stated in its submission to the Productivity Commission, 'high performing systems across the world not only collect data, but also use it effectively to measure outcomes and drive improvements'.[114] Further, 'high performing systems gather, analyse and share data on system performance, and use data as a tool to direct the allocation of system support'.[115]

There is a significant amount of data collected about education in Australia. This occurs at the school, sector, system, jurisdiction and national levels. However, as the Productivity Commission has found, there is no single, standalone place where all NSRA outcomes and performance are reported.[116] This inhibits the ability of the community to determine what has been achieved and meaningfully engage in a conversation about the success, or otherwise, of education reform.

The next NSRA provides an opportunity to consider how data collection, sharing and reporting can be improved to ensure that:

- we focus data collection and reporting on the things that matter
- the impacts of policy changes on student outcomes can be identified, shared and incorporated into future policy reform processes.

5.2 What data is currently collected and how is it used?

The Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (MFSA) is one of the key mechanisms for reporting on educational outcomes at a national level and is the agreed basis for reporting to the community on progress towards the Mparntwe Education Declaration.[117] The MFSA contains nationally agreed key performance measures which are reported on in the annual National Report on Schooling in Australia and the Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia dashboard and dataset.[118]

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114. Barber and Mourshed 2007.
115. Mourshed et al. 2010.
116. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 264.
117. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2023.
118. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2023.

However, as the Productivity Commission has identified, the MFSA is not designed and not intended to report on NSRA outcomes and has substantial gaps in reporting on outcomes for students from the current NSRA priority equity cohorts.[119] For example, there is limited data collected on students with disability.

Schools, systems and jurisdictions also collect a significant amount of data, but this data is not regularly shared. Recently Education Ministers agreed on a model to roll out the Unique Student Identifier (USI) nationally to all school students. The USI is a government-issued individual education number for life. This initiative has the potential to transform our understanding of student learning trajectories. Its initial use will be limited to the inclusion of the USI in the agreed dataset under the Student Data Transfer Protocol, with no further uses considered until the initiative is fully implemented and every school student has a national USI.

Connecting datasets across jurisdictions would significantly increase our understanding of what makes a difference in improving student outcomes in Australia. Greater linkage of data presents an opportunity for governments to have greater insight into schooling, which they can use for research and policy development. It will aid in evaluating the success of programs, identifying areas in need of greater resources, and tracking trends and developing interventions to overcome challenges. It would also enrich our understanding of how education intersects with other policy areas. An example of data linkage and the benefits it provides is the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP). With this, the ABS can analyse complex questions about the Australian population, providing new insights that would be impossible from a single data source.

While increased data sharing is essential to tracking the outcomes of students and the success of education reform, both the quality and quantity of data are important to ensure that insights are accurate and are available for all students. To successfully use data in assessing education reform, parties should work together to identify and share the most appropriate data to provide the required insights.

Where data involves First Nations people it is essential that appropriate data governance is established for the collection and use of this data. These mechanisms must actively involve First Nations people and be protective and respectful towards First Nations individual and collective interests.

The prospect of data sharing may also raise concerns around privacy-related issues, the creation of league tables, and increased resource and administrative burdens on teachers and schools. Relevant parties must take these concerns into consideration and set out appropriate rules and protocols to ensure data sharing is done in a safe and secure manner.

5.3 There are a number of data gaps to be filled, but this must be considered against the burden it would place on teachers and schools

A series of shortfalls limit the ability of governments, systems, schools, and teachers to analyse and measure individual student performance and growth over time, recognise and address the learning needs of students in an effective and timely manner, and track return on investment from policy initiatives.

The next NSRA provides an opportunity for governments to set new targets and outcomes, which may require the collection of new data. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 6 of the consultation paper canvass possible targets and reforms for inclusion in the next NSRA which would necessitate the collection of relevant data. It will be critical to ensure that new data is only collected if the benefits of understanding the data outweigh the costs of acquiring the data, including any impact on teacher and principal workload.

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119. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 267. The Productivity Commission NSRA Performance Reporting Dashboard provides the official public reporting on the NSRA targets and outcomes; however, this is currently limited.

Several reviews have highlighted the gap in reporting on outcomes for students with disability.[120] In addition, the Productivity Commission recommended consideration of a broader list of priority equity cohorts in the next NSRA, including students living in out-of-home care, students with English as an additional language or dialect, students in youth detention and refugee students.[121] The current data collection and reporting framework does not allow for reporting on these cohorts.

The current national reporting mechanism is not NSRA specific, which limits the capacity for the community to track progress on commitments. The next NSRA provides an opportunity for all jurisdictions to recommit to transparency and accountability in this regard – for example, through a tailored reporting mechanism designed to track progress on the targets and reforms included in the next NSRA.

Establishing a tailored reporting mechanism will not only enable policymakers to more easily identify successful reforms and interventions but also result in greater transparency to the public. This will provide communities with a better understanding of how the education system is performing and better enable them to become partners in the schooling system.

Schools, systems, sectors and jurisdictions have access to a significant amount of data which has the potential to improve the evidence base for policymaking in Australia. This includes data on the impact that pilots and programs have had on student outcomes. However, this information does not appear to be effectively collated and transmitted to enable others to learn from the experience. There is merit in considering what systems would be necessary to facilitate more routine information sharing between all jurisdictions, to provide a national perspective. For example, would having a single agency responsible for holding such data in a secure and protected manner and providing analysis of the data to all jurisdictions be an effective mechanism?

5.4 The next NSRA could improve data reporting and quality

Two possible means by which the next NSRA could improve data usage are data reform and data improvement.

Data reform involves changes to what education data is collected and/or how it is reported. For example, the creation of the *MySchool* website (www.myschool.edu.au) in 2010 enabled the community to see NAPLAN results and other information at the school level. This generated a deeper understanding of how levels of socio-economic advantage and other factors at the school level impact on outcomes.

Data improvement involves increasing the quality, scope, coverage and/or integration of existing datasets. This would include such things as adding additional equity groups to existing reporting, publishing the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability on MySchool, and sharing data to enable national insights across all students.

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120. Productivity Commission 2022, p. 267; Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2020, p. 52.
121. Productivity Commission 2022, p 116.

Questions

26. What types of data are of most value to you and how accessible are these for you?

27. Is there any data not currently collected and reported on that is vital to understanding education in Australia? Why is this data important?

28. Should data measurement and reporting on outcomes of students with disability be a priority under the next NSRA? If so, how can this data be most efficiently collected?

29. Is there a need to establish a report which tracks progress on the targets and reforms in the next NSRA? Should it report at a jurisdictional and a national level? What should be included in the report?

30. Is there data collected by schools, systems, sectors or jurisdictions that could be made more available to inform policy design and implementation? What systems would be necessary to make this data available safely and efficiently?

31. The Productivity Commission and AERO have identified the need for longitudinal data to identify the actual students at risk of falling behind based on their performance (and not on equity groups alone) and to monitor these students' progress over time. Should this be the key data reform for the next NSRA?

32. Should an independent body be responsible for collecting and holding data? What rules should be in place to govern the sharing of data through this body?

33. Is there data being collected that is no longer required?

34. How could the national USI support improved outcomes for students?

Chapter 6: Funding transparency and accountability

6.1 Funding transparency and accountability is important for students, parents, policymakers and the community

Transparency[122] and accountability[123] are important interlinked concepts that are integral to ensuring confidence in public expenditure.

The *Australian Education Act 2013* (the Act) includes a set of requirements for Approved Authorities[124] – the legal entities that the Australian Government holds responsible for the administration of Commonwealth funding to schools – that are to be applied in the distribution of needs-based recurrent funding to schools. The requirements are that the funding arrangements and allocations to schools comprise both base and needs-based loadings, and are publicly available and transparent. Consistent with the requirements, Approved Authorities have the flexibility to allocate and expend funding in response to local educational priorities and needs. This may be different to the allocations of the SRS, recognising that Approved Authorities have more detailed knowledge of the needs of their students and schools. This reflects subsidiarity, one of the four principles of Commonwealth school funding policy. The four principles are:

1. Needs-based – Higher levels of funding are targeted to disadvantaged students and schools, with the objective of reducing educational inequity.

2. Subsidiarity – Approved Authorities and schools have the flexibility to allocate funding in a manner which they see fit to meet educational priorities and needs.

3. Accountability – Jurisdictions and non-government authorities are required to provide assurance that Commonwealth funding is spent for educational purposes outlined in the Act and the Australian Education Regulation 2013 (the Regulation).

4. Consistency – Commonwealth funding shares are clear and consistent within each sector, and funding changes predictably across time to minimise disruptions for schools.

Given that Approved Authorities can allocate public funding according to local needs, there must be appropriate transparency in the use of these funds. This helps to ensure that Approved Authorities are accountable for how they are allocating funds as well as for the educational outcomes sought through that funding.

The final report of the *Review of Funding for Schooling* made clear that parents, educators and the broader community should be able to understand in practice how school funding arrangements take place at the local level.[125] The report recognised the importance of rigorous accountability to the successful implementation of Australia's needs-based model. A lack of transparency and accountability makes it difficult for school communities to understand their rights and needs, [126] and ensure these are being met.

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122. Transparency reveals reliable information about institutional performance, including specifying officials' responsibilities, as well as where public funds go. Fox 2007.
123. Accountability can be understood through the distinctions of soft and hard accountability. Soft accountability requires those in authority to justify their decisions ('answerability'). Hard accountability involves answerability plus the possibility of sanctions. Fox 2007.
124. An approved authority for a school is the legal entity the Australian Government holds responsible for the administration of the school. For a government school located in a state or territory, the Approved Authority is the state or territory department established to oversee education. For a non-government school, the Approved Authority is a body corporate that is approved by the Commonwealth Education Minister. *Australian Education Act 2013*, s 4.
125. Gonski et al. 2011, pp. 48-49, 151.
126. Gonski et al. p. 96.

A review of needs-based funding requirements under the Act conducted by the National School Resourcing Board (NSRB) concluded that the transparency of needs-based funding arrangements is enhanced through publishing information about Approved Authorities' distributions of funding.[127] To increase the transparency of needs-based funding arrangements and support public understanding of how these arrangements distribute funding to schools, the NSRB recommended that consideration be given to consulting with the state and territory governments to amend reporting requirements to cover base and loading allocations to schools.

There has been significant progress over the last decade with the establishment of *MySchool* and reporting requirements under the Act. However, further work is required to meet community expectations. For example, the Productivity Commission noted that the data provided on *MySchool* is not granular enough to offer insight into how funding is used to lift outcomes for students from priority cohorts.[128]

Ensuring greater clarity and transparency in the funding system will provide the community, as well as researchers and policy makers, opportunities to understand how and why money is provided to schools, and what it is spent on. This will build confidence in the methodologies used and a greater understanding of Approved Authority and school priorities.

6.2 We don't have a clear picture of how funding is allocated or spent

The Commonwealth distributes its share of funding to Approved Authorities responsible for the administration and operation of schools. For government schools, the Approved Authority is the state or territory government department established to oversee education. Authorities for non-government schools are incorporated bodies approved by the Commonwealth Education Minister. These bodies could be for a single school or could encompass a number of schools, as in the case of a state Catholic Education Commission.

All Approved Authorities are required to complete reporting to the Commonwealth demonstrating whether funding is being spent in accordance with, and schools are meeting their obligations under, the Act. However, current practice is that information provided to the Commonwealth depends on the sector of the Approved Authority and how many schools it represents, resulting in variations in the level of transparency and accountability provided.

The mechanisms for transparency between the Commonwealth and Approved Authorities do not always provide clear line of sight between SRS allocations and what is actually provided to schools or how the funding is being spent. For example, the Commonwealth receives Block Allocation Reports from Approved Authorities responsible for more than one school. These encourage reporting to be disaggregated according to the amounts distributed for base funding, loadings, administrative costs, and centralised expenditure. This includes information showing allocations for each school, determined in accordance with the Approved Authority's needs-based funding arrangement. However, the Regulation does not officially prescribe the provision of this information, unless requested in writing by the Commonwealth Education Minister.[129] Without the transparency around the allocation of funding and the way it is being used by schools, it is difficult for the Commonwealth and the Approved Authorities to be confident in their understanding of how funding is being used to support students and lift outcomes.

127. Chaney et al. 2020, p. 26.
128. Productivity Commission (2022), p. 133.
129. Australian Education Regulation 2013, reg 35(1A).

Providing communities with funding information about their local school enables parents and community members to engage as members of the school community and, by understanding the allocation of funding, have confidence in the government commitment to their school. Some information is made publicly available, such as the *MySchool* website's information on state and territory budgets, each school's aggregate recurrent income (by funding source) and capital expenditure, and school annual reports. However, the allocation of funds to schools in Australia remains a challenge for the public to understand, and it is not always possible to see how and where public funding is allocated and distributed and how that funding is spent. This makes it more difficult for communities to gain a sound knowledge of funding and resource allocation and may reduce the community's confidence in the way public funding is invested.

6.3 Where are the gaps?

6.3.1 Information on funding is needed to increase understanding of links with student outcomes

There is currently insufficient visibility of funding data to effectively evaluate how funding impacts student outcomes.

Most Approved Authorities collect data and undertake evaluations. They hold this information centrally but do not publish or share it due to constraints and sensitivities that could arise when making comparisons between different jurisdictions and schools. This limits opportunities to create a national picture of where schools are performing well and where more support is needed, and consequently limits the ability to recommend new initiatives or the expansion of existing ones to drive improved performance across schools. Further, there is a lack of visibility as to how Approved Authorities use the evaluations they undertake to determine the allocation of funds to improve student outcomes.

6.3.2 School funding allocations and levels of funding should be targeted to those that need it most

Submissions to the Productivity Commission review expressed the desire for more visibility as to how money is distributed and spent, down to a school level, with a particular emphasis on how funds are used to support priority equity cohorts.[130]

Currently the amount the Commonwealth provides to each Approved Authority is known, and the total funding for schools is provided on *MySchool*. However, information on the methodologies used by Approved Authorities to calculate and allocate funding and resources and the amounts allocated for schools and different cohorts is not transparent to stakeholders. Greater transparency about methodologies, allocations and expenditure could include information on different funding mechanisms, including base per student, additional loadings, school/operational level funding, centralised funding and targeted centralised programs.

Providing greater transparency about funding allocations and expenditure from all government funding streams through to schools is useful to the community, researchers and policymakers as an expression of priorities. Further, greater transparency about how schools expend funding to support students would provide the community with the assurance they need that funding is used appropriately to help those it is intended for.

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130. National School Resourcing Board 2022, p. 7; Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting 2022, pp. 5-6.

Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System - Consultation Paper

6.4 The next NSRA could increase funding accountability and transparency

The next NSRA will be an opportunity to establish new outcomes, targets, sub-outcomes and reforms. Options that could be pursued to increase funding transparency and accountability include:

- The next NSRA could establish mutual obligations between the Commonwealth and states and territories to share relevant data and evaluations for the purpose of improving student outcomes. This will inform more effective targeting of funding to students most in need, including priority equity cohorts. This could further be supported by giving an organisation in the existing education architecture responsibility for analysing and evaluating data to better understand funding and how it relates to student outcomes. This would ensure a level of independence due to the distance between the assessor and system leaders.

- The next NSRA could set new initiatives requiring Approved Authorities to publish information about the methodologies used to calculate and distribute funding and resources to schools, allocations to schools broken down by base and loadings, and the aggregate amount for different cohorts. This could include requirements to publish up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive descriptions of the models and methodologies underpinning funding distributions, information on the allocations to schools broken down by base and loadings, and the proportion of resources (expended centrally in programs run by Approved Authorities or distributed directly to schools) which are allocated and used to support priority equity cohorts.

- Schools could be required to report to the public on how funding is used to support the students it is intended for. For example, the next NSRA could seek agreed commitments to set new guidelines to establish additional transparency of funding allocations and distributions to schools, broken down by base and loadings. Therefore, if an amount, either through a loading or otherwise, is provided from an Approved Authority to support First Nations students, schools could report on how those funds are used to support First Nations students.

Questions

35. Are there other objectives for funding accountability and transparency we have missed?

36. How can governments make better use of the information already collected and/or published to achieve the objectives?

37. What other funding accountability and transparency information regarding schools (both your school and the education system more generally) would be useful?

38. What are the priority gaps in the current funding transparency and accountability arrangements from your perspective?

Attachment A

Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System – five key areas from the terms of reference

1. What targets and reforms should be included in the next NSRA to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a particular focus on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English.

2. How the next agreement can contribute to improving student mental health and wellbeing, by addressing in-school factors while acknowledging the impact of non-school factors on wellbeing.

3. How the next agreement can support schools to attract and retain teachers.

4. How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes.

5. How to ensure public funding is delivering on national agreements and that all school authorities are transparent and accountable to the community for how funding is invested and measuring the impacts of this investment.

Attachment B

Current methods through which Approved Authorities provide transparency as to the use of Commonwealth funding

Document	Transparency and accountability provided
Financial Questionnaire	For all non-government Australian schools receiving Commonwealth Government recurrent funding. Provides to the Commonwealth calendar year financial information, including income; expenditure; assets; and liabilities.[131]
Acquittal Certificate	For all Approved System Authorities. Certifies that the financial assistance provided by the Commonwealth Government has been spent, or is committed to be spent, in accordance with relevant provisions of the Act.[132]
Block Allocation Report	For all Approved System Authorities with responsibility for more than one school. Details how Commonwealth recurrent funding was distributed to each school. [133]
Section 78 (5) of the Act	Requires Approved System Authorities to use a needs-based funding arrangement when distributing funding to member schools, and to make this model publicly available and transparent[134].
Section 22a of the Act	For states and territories, a sector-level funding report setting out its total funding for each sector. A consolidated report is then undertaken by the National School Resourcing Board and published.

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131. Australian Education Regulation 2013, reg 36.
132. Australian Education Regulation 2013, reg 34.
133. Australian Education Regulation 2013, regs 35, 36.
134. The National School Resourcing Board conducted a review of Approved System Authority needs-based funding arrangements and public availability in 2019. National School Resourcing Board (2019) Review of needs-based funding requirements: final report December 2019 (www.education.gov.au/national-school-resourcing-board/resources/review-needs-based-funding-requirements-final-report-december-2019), Department of Education.

Attachment C

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