

Submission
to the
Productivity Commission
Review of the National School Reform
Agreement

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Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

One voice for every child in government education



Introduction

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) represents the interests of the families and communities of more than 2.6 million children and young people attending government schools in Australia. We are one of the oldest continuously operating parent organisations in Australia, possibly the world. Formed in 1947, we bring together various state and territory parent groups, plus other families with an interest in public education, to develop national policies reflecting the way families want public education to be offered for all children. Over time there have been some changes in the way our members in states and territory peak parent groups have approached national issues, as such membership varies – what is consistent is our commitment to ensuring equity and access for all young people attending government schools in Australia.

We believe that the primary obligation of governments, both Federal and State, is to establish and maintain government systems of education which:

- *engages with family and community at all levels of education;*
- *are of the highest standard and open to all, irrespective of race, gender, religion, social economic status, geographic location, or ability;*
- *can respond to changing landscape of education and respond to develop flexible and diverse programs necessary to meet all student needs;*
- *discriminates in favour of those schools and individual students who are challenged with disadvantage and/or ability.*

The Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration states that “all Australian Governments will work with the education community to provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination”ⁱ

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration also states “Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing” and that “education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion”ⁱⁱ

Status

The education of our youth is fundamental to their success and the growth our nation. Australia should take little pride in the fact that we have one of the longest equity tails in the OECD. Whilst the Australian Education Act of 2013 went some way to addressing this, the current agreements, the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 and the additional special provisions have allowed the inequities to grow.

The current agreements were negotiated at a time of a change of government. The outgoing government was instrumental in the funding review and had passed legislation that was the grounding for these agreements. At the time of the election only a few of the jurisdictions had negotiated them. The then new government, had a totally different outlook on education funding, much of which influenced the negotiations with the jurisdictions that didn’t already have an agreement in place prior to the election.

This time (2022), we are in a different climate. We have a newly elected government, a new Minister and many new faces leading states and territories. We know the global situation and we are aware that current funding is not closing any equity gaps.

We also have gone through almost 30 months of a global pandemic, east coast bushfires and floods. Student mental health, anxiety and the effects of a global trauma need to be considered.ⁱⁱⁱ Not forgetting of course, the rise in inflation, interest rates and electricity. Many families faced extreme financial loss over this period. Many young people, as well as their families, disengaged with school

The COVID-19 pandemic and the exceptional circumstances it has created has and will continue to impact on any collaboration or implementation of national initiatives.

The global health crisis meant that students spent many months in their homes participating in school remotely. It exacerbated the already existing inequities. To community and policy developers the inequities in education have become more obvious, we need to act now.

In schools we are faced with huge numbers of students and teacher absences due to COVID and influenza A&B. The influenza is having a major effect on absenteeism and many young people are being hospitalised. We also know that we have a major teacher shortage – many students missing lessons or having multiple teachers for subjects due to the unavailability of teaching staff. Workforce is a major issue and currently is one of the most critical challenges that needs addressing.

School failure penalises a child for life. The student who leaves school without completing upper secondary education or without relevant skills has fewer life prospects.^{iv} The fact that this cohort has faced two years of intermittent face to face teaching; remote learning, many with little contact from their teachers in the way of instruction, no proven strategy to assist young people with learning difficulties and many without appropriate access either to technology or support. This year they have returned to the ever-worsening teacher shortage and high absenteeism through the continuation of COVID and the outbreak of influenza. There are many young people yet to re-engage and relationships that need to be rebuilt.

Student led inquiry, building on strengths (rather than filling gaps) and individual education plans are strategies that need greater consideration and implementation to make education more accessible, engaging, and contemporary.

What conclusion is drawn identifies that there needs to be a rethink on what are the priorities for these young people and what needs to be done to guarantee improvement in student outcomes in the future. The funding inequities is a crucial flaw.

As a matter of fact, a major concern is under Section 30 of the NSRA, the scope of the review will not include any assessment of compliance to section 22A of the Australian Education Act (2013). The NSRA is tied to funding, considering the Reform Directions or National Policy Initiatives (NPI) without considering the funding is somewhat unsound.

“The Commonwealth provides funding to States and Territories to distribute to all eligible schools through the Act, based on the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). The SRS is made up of a base funding amount for every student plus six additional loadings that provide extra funding to meet the needs of all students.”^v

As funding is “based on the SRS” no government schools be near the full SRS by the conclusion of the current NSRA and its associated bilateral agreements in 2023, with the exception of the ACT.

Commonwealth funding arrangement changes contained in the Australian Education Act which was amended in 2017 undid the needs-based approach to schools funding. In most states, the state / territory government is contributing only 75% of the SRS within many states 4% of that is depreciation. Most agreements have other anomalies such as student transport, counted in that 75%.

The changes and anomalies have only gone to deepen the funding inequity.

Driving student outcomes:

Whether in primary, secondary, or tertiary education, academic performance is an essential part of progressing to the next level on the educational journey. When academic performance and productivity are explored there are several major drivers that impact on the end results. Just addressing a student's: -

- classroom work performance,
- graduation rates,
- class placement,
- results from standardised exams, or
- skill achievement.

does not identify all the drivers that impact on student outcomes.

Drivers of student outcomes across the three domains academic achievement, engagement and skill acquisition are determined by a number of factors. The key driver being equity.

Australia has one of the most inequitable education systems in the developed world. Factors such as postcode, parental education attainment and income strong indicators of their child's potential educational success.

Groups identified as being at risk of inequitable educational outcomes include:

- Young people from low SES households
- Young people with parents who have low level of educational attainment
- Young people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background
- Young people with living with disability
- Young people from CALD families
- Young people living in regional, rural, or remote areas

What is obvious is that many of the many of these key drivers and levers cross government portfolios and are thus particularly suited to collaborative efforts. When households are affected by poverty, provision of basic needs such as housing and food become a greater priority than educational materials, while chronic parental stress impedes care-giving capacity and the ability to support learning. We know through our surveys that this is further compounded by the lack of online accessibility and the technology and resources that enable it.

Family engagement

Over 50 years of evidence indicates that family engagement (often referred to as as parent engagement) in a young person's learning improves educational outcomes. Family engagement involves an active partnership between schools and the primary carers of children, sharing the funds each partner has a bout the young person, by having two-way conversations between families and teachers, and supporting students to manage the stressors and pressures of their experiences.

Effective family engagement improves both academic and non-academic educational outcomes, such as child wellbeing and successful transition to adulthood.

Engaging families can be complex and should not be seen as an add on to school strategies but embedded in all areas of school education. It can look different and be a little more challenging in families with low socioeconomic background, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Family engagement needs a strong policy framework to set the boundaries around what family engagement is, and what it is not. Systems need a strong focus on identifying the resources and professional development requirements that will foster the embedding of family engagement into educational policy and practice.

This crucial partnership seems to have taken a back seat in priorities for systems and governments in Australia. Our research over the past two years identifies those schools with already established home school partnerships had greater success during the lockdown periods in both student engagement and having a clear understanding of each student's experience – particularly when families had competing priorities during this time. What we have also discovered, from our discussions with families and our national surveys, that since schools have resumed to face to face instruction some additional barriers have appeared in the name of "health and safety". While some are genuine many gates and schools are not as "open" as they previously been. ACSSO has been extremely active in this area in both advocacy and implementation

- ACSSO was one of the key drivers in Family Engagement and partnered with the Australian Parents Council (APC) to develop the [Family – School Partnership Framework](#) which has seen a number of updates over time.
- ACSSO (2017) developed the [Family Engagement Circle](#) which can be interactive and take the school leadership through a journey of changing culture to enable families and school to work in partnership
- ACSSO (2021) has put online an [Introduction to Family Engagement](#) for beginning teachers, however with little content in Family Engagement in either pre-service or professional learning, this course is ideal for any one who wants to understand the concept and value of family engagement in their teaching.

We know that successful outcomes depend on strong relationships. Education is relational. As reiterated earlier we know that supporting outcomes need a cross agency approach, something not very well practiced within education for a number of reasons, but time would be a major factor.

A young person's background

We are all different, and everyone has a different background, history, and family life. The influence of family background on educational success is considerable. The gap between children from families of low income and their more affluent peers has only widened and the effect of family background on educational achievements ensures that inequities persist through the generations. The funding policies of Australian governments, in continuing to under resource government schools, clearly identifies that current education policies are focusing on maximizing achievement for the most able students. Instead, educational interventions should ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds get the most support.

Housing Environment

Researchers conclude that housing can be a platform for academic achievement among low SES families—that is, high-quality, safe, and affordable housing can go beyond providing basic shelter and stability and can help provide a stable environment with access to their local school. It is our understanding that most of the empirical evidence to date, focuses on the absence of high-quality, affordable housing and its consequences for young Australians. We know that housing *can be a positive driver* to achieving better school outcomes.

Mental Health

Mental health awareness is a critical issue for all Australians, particularly for our schools and educators who need to be trained in mental health issues in order to be part of the first line of defence for young people. Governments, schools, and educators must have an awareness of the impact that a student's mental health has on learning and achievement, promote healthy social, emotional, and behavioural development of students, and break down barriers to learning so the general well-being of students, families, and school staff can be enhanced in collaboration with other comprehensive student support and services such as: -

- Integrating comprehensive services and support throughout every year level
- Assessing mental health needs through universal, selective, and targeted interventions
- Providing access to behavioural and mental health services and programs
- Leveraging higher-level personnel, such as those working with the Departments of Education and/or Health for necessary support and services
- Building collaborative relationships between the school and students' families and communities

ACSSO has been a partner of [the Life Skills GO](#) program that assist in measurement and data collection of a young person's well-being. Together we have seen the concerning outcomes that has been revealed in data from [National Check in Week](#) held recently.

Financial Status

The relationship between socioeconomic background (SES) and student achievement is well-established, with a vast body of literature showing that more advantaged students tend to do better in school than disadvantaged students.

Educational disadvantage is a significant factor in students' educational outcomes. In Australia there is a staggering level of inequality between outcomes for students from high socioeconomic background and those from low socioeconomic background. Even attending a school with a high or low average socioeconomic background can have an influence to how a student will perform educationally.

Whilst some of these drivers are similar to what was identified in the reviews over the past decade – the global and local events of particularly the past 3 years have exacerbated the effects of these drivers.

Within the secondary school setting in particular – subject fees have a major effect on the course of study a student can participate in. Many students who do not wish to follow, or would have greater success with subjects like hospitality, photography, construction find subject fees higher and prohibitive. Similarly, students who shine in the Arts and Sports who live in low SES communities find

the ability to continue to their potential find it cost prohibitive. The ability to fundraise in these communities, to support these students, is also problematic.

Loadings

We note also, whilst there has been a focus on the loadings for disability, disadvantage, rural and remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, very little focus has been shown regarding EAL/D. The devolution of responsibility for EAL/D (as well as the other loadings) to State and Territory governments, and further the aggregation of funding through school global budgets, has compromised the targeted provision of funding for EAL/D learner support.

It is clearly noted that there has been lack of transparency and accountability for the allocation and use of Gonski needs-based English language funding. There still, is inadequate funding levels. There is also an absence of any national reporting of students' English language levels, learning or progress. Like with classroom teachers we know there is also a lack of national workforce planning for specialist English language teachers.

Message for NSRB

ACSSO believes there is a need for greater accountability for commonwealth funding, it is currently inadequate. Whilst we acknowledge a suitable calculation for each of the loadings can be imprecise, there is a need for greater transparency.

Funding for government schools is inadequate – the calculation for the state contribution is riddled with flaws. The Commonwealth needs to ensure the full 100% of funding is immediate. The removal of items such as depreciation and student transport should not be included in the calculation – states and territories need to make sure schools receive at the least their full amount.

Family engagement, and the establishment of a Family School Community Partnerships Bureau like Family Engagement Institute, will ensure that the improvement of Student outcomes is realised. ACSSO is keen to be foundational in this.

We are also keen to see the progress of the Unique Student Identifier (USI) – making transitions and mobility of students to new schools more successful.

In essence, ACSSO believes the funding to schools in Australia continues to be inequitable. The last two years of pandemic and climate emergencies has not only exacerbated the equity tail, but it has also seen young people disengage and leave. Our teacher workforce is in a place of crisis – immediate investment in government schools by the Commonwealth is essential not just for economic growth but for the well being and future of our nation's government school students

ⁱ Council of Australian Government, 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

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ⁱⁱⁱ ACSSO partnered with [Life Skills](#) Group in National Check in week

^{iv} OECD 2012

^v Page 4 of the NSRA