

# Review of the National School Reform Agreement

## Response to Productivity Commission's interim report

**14 October 2022**

This submission is made by Save the Children and 54 reasons.

Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights that has been active in Australia for over 100 years. 54 reasons delivers Save the Children's services in Australia, working alongside children and their families and communities in accordance with the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

This submission responds to the Productivity Commission's interim report released in September 2022. Please also see our initial submission dated 17 June 2022, as cited in the interim report, for additional recommendations and analysis.

### High-level assessment of the National Policy Initiatives<sup>1</sup>

We support the Commission's draft finding 2.2: *'The National School Reform Agreement has weaknesses that undermine its effectiveness in facilitating collective, national efforts to lift student outcomes'*.

#### Response to information request 2.2: Options for enhancing accountability in the next agreement

Enhancing accountability should be a priority in the next agreement. To achieve this, it should in turn be a high priority to ensure that students and groups representing students have effective input at each stage of the policy process across the next agreement's development, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review.

Students have a fundamental right to be heard and taken seriously on all matters that affect them. This is grounded in the right that all people have to be able to shape their own lives and the particular importance of this right being actively supported for those of school age, as recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>2</sup>

The formalised involvement of student voice at a system level, encompassing genuine and meaningful student participation in school system policy-making, would strengthen accountability. This would, in turn, strengthen the next intergovernmental agreement's ability to achieve its objectives, and bring benefits for all relevant stakeholders, including – but not limited to – students themselves. Effective input by students could enhance accountability in the next agreement by:

- Creating a direct relationship between governments and students, as the people who are most affected by schools policy, whose outcomes are the focus of such policy, and who have unique expertise and lived experience of the school system.
- Enabling the design of more effective and fit-for-purpose accountability mechanisms and processes, by ensuring that accountability mechanisms and processes are meaningful, accessible and relevant to students.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 of the Commission's interim report.

<sup>2</sup> Article 12 of the Convention.



- Enabling the design and monitoring of more relevant indicators and outcomes, by ensuring that reporting and monitoring includes indicators and outcomes that are directly informed by students' perspectives on what matters and should be measured.

We also note the Commission is seeking views on the benefits, costs and risks of jurisdictions publicly specifying and reporting annually on the outcomes they expect to achieve and related indicators, and aligning the design of outcomes and indicators across jurisdictions. We believe this would have significant benefits, without undermining jurisdictions' ability to pursue outcomes in ways that reflect their individual circumstances and the particular needs of students in each jurisdiction.

### Lifting outcomes for all students<sup>3</sup>

We support the Commission's draft findings 3.1 to 3.5:

- *'Many students have additional needs that do not directly relate to culture, disability or remoteness'*
- *'Governments are yet to achieve outcomes for students who have specific educational needs related to their culture, their disability or remoteness, as set out in the National School Reform Agreement'*
- *'Governments have failed to adequately demonstrate how reforms under the National School Reform Agreement are addressing specific educational needs related to students' culture, disability or remoteness'*
- *'The priority equity cohorts in the National School Reform Agreement do not capture all cohorts of students experiencing educational disadvantage'*
- *'There are a range of educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts'*

We also support the Commission's draft recommendation 3.1: *'Implementation plans, developed in consultation with affected groups, should be used to improve the transparency of reform actions and to hold parties to account for the outcomes they commit to achieve'*.

#### Response to information request 3.2: Priority equity cohorts for the next agreement

Children who are living in out-of-home care should be a priority equity cohort in the next agreement. This should extend, with appropriate calibration, to children who are not currently living in out-of-home care but have experience of out-of-home care. In our experience, children living in out-of-home care face significant, systemic barriers to accessing and remaining engaged in education and achieving good educational outcomes. As a group, they are educationally vulnerable due to their multiple experiences of adversity and the ongoing effects of trauma. Services and systems – including schools – have consistently not met their needs, primarily due to services being inadequately integrated, organised around children and their best interests, culturally responsive and trauma responsive.

#### Response to information requests 3.3: Implementation plans and 3.5: Embedding the perspectives of priority equity cohorts in national education policy and institutions

Students have unique expertise about the school system and lived experience about how the school system operates and how it could be improved. As noted above, students should be involved at all stages of the education policy process. The benefits of their involvement extend beyond enhanced accountability (see above) and would also include improved policy-making, more effective implementation, greater community and school-level support for policies and initiatives, and enhanced wellbeing, engagement and other outcomes for students through their participation.

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<sup>3</sup> Chapter 3 of the Commission's interim report.

However, the current National School Reform Agreement contains no mechanisms for governments to recognise and benefit from this expertise and lived experience, or to be accountable to students for actions taken under the agreement or for the agreement's success in achieving its goals.

This is a significant gap that fundamentally undermines the agreement's effectiveness. It should be addressed both for students generally, and specifically for students in priority equity cohorts, who are the least likely and yet the most important to be heard and taken seriously given the marginalisation and disadvantage they face in the current school system.

Specific actions that could be taken to embed students' voices and lived experiences of the school system in national education policies and institutions, including priority equity cohorts, include:

- Governments should engage meaningfully with students when the next intergovernmental agreement is being developed, to ensure student perspectives inform that next agreement.
- Governments should establish ongoing advisory and consultation mechanisms to enable meaningful student involvement in implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review of the next intergovernmental agreement. This should encompass student participation and involvement at a national level, and within each State and Territory, and should be established with an appropriate level of resourcing and independence from government.
- Governments should support the development of resources providing guidance for education sector organisations – including government departments – about how to embed students' voices and lived experiences in their work, including how to consult and engage meaningfully with students. This should be accompanied by the rollout of a training program. Both the resources and training should be co-designed and co-delivered with students themselves, supported by organisations that represent students as required.
- Governments should measure and report on student voice, agency and participation in their education as part of the measurement framework for the next intergovernmental agreement. Outcomes and indicators of the system's performance in supporting student voice, agency and participation should be co-designed with students themselves and be relevant to all students, with specific focus on students in priority equity cohorts.
- Governments should report on actions taken and progress towards all outcomes under the agreement in student-friendly ways, with specific communication targeted to students and opportunities for student feedback as part of all reporting.

#### **Student wellbeing<sup>4</sup>**

We support the Commission's draft finding 4.1: *'Many students experience poor wellbeing, but some do not receive effective support'* and draft recommendation 4.1: *'Governments should incorporate wellbeing in the next intergovernmental agreement'*.

We refer to our initial submission on these matters, including the basis for our views and suggestions for how to incorporate wellbeing in the next intergovernmental agreement. We note in particular that, while identifying appropriate and nationally consistent measures of wellbeing would be necessary, there are existing measures and tools that would provide a useful starting point. We also reinforce the significant value in developing such a national measure or set of measures for more comprehensively and holistically understanding the true performance of the education system.

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 4 of the Commission's interim report.

Response to information request 4.1: Should there be National Policy Initiatives to improve student wellbeing?

As noted in our initial submission, we believe the next intergovernmental agreement should include specific national policy initiatives aimed directly at each of student wellbeing and student engagement, and should encompass an explicit emphasis on student voice, agency and participation.

We suggest that the next intergovernmental agreement should establish a National Student Wellbeing Program. This Program would provide funding and parameters for schools to access specialist school-based support and programs to support student wellbeing and engagement. It would complement existing efforts to build the mental health and wellbeing capacity of school workforces. It could take the form of a fund that could be accessed by schools as needed, or a direct allocation to school budgets with a requirement that the allocation be used for eligible specialist school-based supports and programs.

We further suggest that the agreement should establish a National Program for Student Voice. It could be established in its own right, or as a component of the proposed National Student Wellbeing Program. The National Program for Student Voice would include funding, guidance and resources: (1) for schools to access support and programs to enhance student voice and student involvement in education and school decision-making; and (2) to support or establish organisations that represent students or have specific expertise in supporting schools to enhance student voice.

In response to the Commission's request for input about specific programs that could be implemented nationally to improve student wellbeing, we highlight two programs delivered by 54 reasons:

- *Hands on Learning* builds at-risk students' connection to school by engaging them in practical, hands-on activities that are meaningful to them and their schools, increasing their sense of belonging with an explicit focus on teaching, building and measuring social and emotional skills development. The program has operated for 23 years and is currently delivered in over 120 primary and secondary schools, mostly in Victoria.
- *Journey of Hope* is a school-based group-work intervention for children who have experienced a collective trauma, supporting emotional processing and coping strategies. The program has successfully supported student wellbeing in schools in severely bushfire and flood-affected communities and in response to the effects of COVID-19. Across Terms 3 and 4 of 2020 and Terms 1 and 2 of 2021, the program reached around 5000 students in around 76 schools across NSW and Victoria, with more in subsequent Terms.

The attachment to our initial submission includes more detail about these programs, which could readily be implemented nationally, in their own right or as options available through a National Student Wellbeing Program or similar initiative. We would be happy to provide further information if useful.

#### **Further information**

To discuss this submission or for more information, please contact:

Howard Choo  
Australian Policy and Advocacy Lead

Matt Gardiner  
CEO, 54 reasons