

17 June 2022

Michael Brennan
Chair, Productivity Commission
Via online submission portal

Dear Chair,

Review of the National School Reform Agreement – Save the Children’s submission

The National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) sets the parameters for how governments work together towards the goals of the school education system in Australia, in the context of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* and its predecessors.

Save the Children believes that the NSRA and the next national school reform agreement should have a much stronger focus on student wellbeing, student engagement and student voice. This would improve student outcomes across Australian school systems. This submission briefly summarises our reasoning and suggestions for the review of the NSRA.

Our submission reflects our perspective as Australia’s leading child rights organisation. We are guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and our extensive experience in giving children’s rights practical expression through policy design and service delivery in Australia. Our focus encompasses children aged up to 18, across the school years.

Our policy positions are based on a child rights approach. We believe that children’s best interests must be a primary consideration and children must be heard and taken seriously in all matters affecting them, that children are entitled to all necessary support to develop to their fullest potential, and that all children have these same rights and must be able to enjoy them without discrimination of any kind. Our views are informed by insights and evidence from our work with children, families and communities across Australia to directly support children to access their rights – including the right to education – particularly our evidence-based programs that operate in schools as part of integrated responses to meeting students’ needs (see [Attachment](#)).

Overall comments – the importance of wellbeing, engagement, learning and voice

Children have a fundamental right to access high quality education, on an equitable basis, through settings and delivery modes that suit and include them.¹ The best way to improve and maximise student outcomes is by establishing school systems and associated policy arrangements that truly enable all children to enjoy this right.

Wellbeing, engagement and learning are the three pillars of a quality education,² for individual students and across school systems as a whole. Wellbeing, engagement and learning are inseparably interrelated. Each is a crucial outcome of schooling in its own right, and a necessary enabler for the others. For example, positive wellbeing and engagement with learning are important ends in themselves, as well as being essential preconditions for successful academic learning.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28.

² Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018, *Student wellbeing, engagement and learning across the middle years*, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, p 14.

Student voice, agency and participation drives improved wellbeing, engagement and learning.³ When students have a meaningful, embedded voice about their education, individually and system-wide, there are significant compounding benefits for the students' own outcomes and for overall school system performance.

Save the Children's view is that:

- The NSRA does not adequately recognise the importance of *student wellbeing* and this is reflected in its absence from the National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) and Measurement Framework.
- While the NSRA identifies all students being *engaged in their schooling (or learning)* as a key outcome, this is not reflected in the NPIs or Measurement Framework.
- The NSRA does not adequately recognise the importance of *student voice* and this is reflected in its absence from the NPIs and Measurement Framework.
- The deficiencies in the NSRA and its implementation through the NPIs and Measurement Framework in relation to student wellbeing, engagement and voice have undermined the NSRA's overall objectives relating to lifting *student outcomes*.

We summarise what this means for the review of the NSRA in our responses to the Productivity Commission's specific information requests below.

Information request 1: Drivers of student outcomes

The evidence indicates that student wellbeing and engagement are key drivers of student outcomes across all three of the key NSRA outcomes domains: academic achievement, engagement, and skill acquisition.⁴

It is important to recognise that wellbeing and engagement are interlinked, multidimensional and must be understood holistically. In particular, both are commonly misunderstood – wellbeing extends well beyond the mere absence of mental or physical illness, and engagement extends well beyond merely attending and completing school.

Social and emotional wellbeing is at the core of the concept of 'wellbeing'. Children, and students, with high social and emotional wellbeing are optimistic, confident and engaged. They have a strong sense of purpose and they believe in themselves. They understand their own emotions, have positive relationships with others, and are good at working through difficulties and resolving conflict.⁵ When students' wellbeing is put under pressure or suffers, this can manifest in a wide range of ways that negatively affect their development and learning.

³ D Gonski et al, 2018, *Through growth to achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, pp 25-6; Department of Education and Training, Victorian Government, 2019, *Amplify: Empowering students through voice, agency and leadership*, pp 8-9 and elsewhere; Department of Education, NSW Government, 2022, *Why student voice matters*, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/student-voices/student-voice-and-leadership/why-student-voice-matters#Research0>.

⁴ J Durlak et al, 2011, 'Enhancing students' social and emotional development promotes success in school: Results of a meta-analysis', *Child Development* 82: 474-501; Deloitte Access Economics, 2012, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*; S Lamb et al, 2015, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Mitchell Institute; Centre for Adolescent Health, above n 2; Social Ventures Australia, 2019, *Children and young people disengaged from education*; K Dix et al, 2020, *Student health and wellbeing: A systematic review of intervention research examining effective student wellbeing in schools and their academic outcomes*, Australian Council for Educational Research.

⁵ See generally Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012, *Social and emotional wellbeing: Development of a children's headline indicator*.

Engagement with learning includes behavioural, emotional (or affective) and cognitive dimensions.⁶ Students who are engaged with their learning feel connected to education and school, participate in academic and other activities at school, have a sense of belonging and inclusion at their school, believe they are learning and developing meaningful skills, take ownership of their learning, and feel that what they are doing at school is purposeful. Disengagement comprises a continuum including passive attendance, actively disruptive behaviour, or being absent or ultimately dropping out of school altogether.⁷

Since the NSRA commenced, Australian students have experienced significant population-wide adversity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This has put significant pressure on student wellbeing and engagement, which for many compounded existing pressures arising from direct exposure to major disasters such as the 2019-20 bushfires, complex disadvantage arising from intergenerational poverty and socio-economic exclusion, and other challenges.⁸

Unfortunately, in coming years, students are likely to experience still more hitherto 'extraordinary' events such as the bushfires and pandemic due to the escalating combined effects of forces including climate change, global inter-connectedness and volatility, and increasingly entrenched inequality and disadvantage in Australia. Student wellbeing, engagement and resilience will continue to be placed under growing pressure into the future, and at the same time will become even more important in the face of such disasters and pressures.⁹ This reinforces the importance of school systems adopting a far more explicit and stronger focus on wellbeing and engagement as the foundations for successful learning, as well as crucial outcomes of education in their own right.

Information request 2: Assessing the appropriateness of the NPIs

A significant failing in the selection of the NSRA's eight NPIs is that none of the NPIs are directly focused on improving student wellbeing or student engagement, despite the importance of wellbeing and engagement to student outcomes as described above. This is the case despite the outcome of 'All students are engaged in their schooling' being one of the NSRA's three key outcomes domains. As a result, the NSRA has not driven a meaningful national focus on wellbeing or engagement, with predictable adverse effects for student outcomes.

This blind spot in the NSRA reflects, and replicates, a systemic failing. Governments continue to adopt a siloed approach to improving student outcomes, which in turn reflects a broader inability by governments to adopt student-centred or child-centred approaches to policy and implementation. Engagement and, particularly, wellbeing are too often de-emphasised in school education policy because they are regarded – explicitly or tacitly – as depending on levers that are not traditionally held or prioritised by education systems. This continues to be the case despite the strong evidence

⁶ J Fredricks, P Blumenfeld and A Paris, 2004, 'School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence', *Review of Educational Research* 74(1): 59-109.

⁷ K Hancock and S Zubrick, 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Telethon Kids Institute, prepared for the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp 14-17.

⁸ Save the Children, 2022, *The true cost of COVID-19: A generation left behind – A recovery plan for Australian children and families*.

⁹ G Bonanno et al, 2010, 'Weighing the costs of disaster: Consequences, risks, and resilience in individuals, families, and communities', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 11(1): 1-49; J M Furr et al, 2010, 'Disasters and youth: A meta-analytic examination of posttraumatic stress', *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology* 78(6): 765-80; L Peek et al, 2017, 'Children and disasters', ch 13 in H Rodríguez et al (eds), *Handbook of Disaster Research*, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research, pp 243-62; H Cahill et al, 2020, *Natural disasters and pandemics: Supporting student and teacher wellbeing after a crisis*, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne; J Clinton, 2020, *Supporting vulnerable children in the face of a pandemic*, April 2020, Centre for Program Evaluation, The University of Melbourne; Group of Eight Australia, 2020, *COVID-19 roadmap to recovery: A report for the nation*, p 129; Save the Children, 2020, *Build back better: Student wellbeing, engagement and recovery in Australia*, Policy Brief.

supporting the importance of wellbeing and engagement to student outcomes, and the numerous recent inquiries highlighting the importance of schools as sites for supporting student wellbeing.¹⁰

However, this systemic failing also represents an opportunity, as well as a particular need for national leadership. A national school reform agreement, with strong involvement by the Commonwealth Government as well as from all States and Territories, provides an unusual opportunity to break with the traditional siloed approach, much of which is driven by existing State-level funding and delivery channels. There is thus a particularly strong case for both wellbeing and engagement being the focus of NPIs in their own right within any national school reform agreement.

Information request 3: Assessing the effectiveness of the NPIs

A key barrier to the effectiveness of the NPIs is that they are 'broad banded' and largely universal in nature, and as such they are unlikely to be equally effective for all student cohorts. In particular, students experiencing socio-economic and educational disadvantage, or who are otherwise vulnerable, are unlikely to benefit equally from the implementation of the NPIs, without more targeted initiatives aimed specifically at their needs. This risks further entrenching inequity and educational disadvantage.

Again, a more explicit and stronger focus on wellbeing and engagement would assist with addressing this barrier, as students experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability are also more likely to experience significant wellbeing challenges or disengagement, and to most benefit from support for their wellbeing and engagement. This could be achieved by adding one or more NPIs that focus directly on wellbeing and engagement.

Information request 4: Measurement Framework and performance indicators

Consistent with our comments above, Save the Children's view is that the Measurement Framework could be improved to better 'measure what matters'. In particular, we note that:

- There are no performance measures relating to student wellbeing. This means that students' social and emotional learning, development and wellbeing is not measured at all.
- The performance measures that directly relate to engagement are limited to measures of retention, completion and attainment. This reflects a very limited perspective on what 'engagement' means, and excludes any measurement of students' sense of belonging or inclusion in their schools or broader dimensions of engagement.
- There are no performance measures relating to student voice, agency and participation in their education, beyond formal involvement in activities and streams such as NAPLAN and VET. This means that the school system's performance in empowering student voice, agency and participation and unlocking the resultant benefits is not being measured or incentivised.

We recognise that measures and indicators would need to be agreed, and in at least some cases new data collections would need to be established, for these matters to be included in the Measurement Framework. This in itself should be a priority under the NSRA, rather than a reason for omitting these matters from what is being measured altogether. We note that there are existing measures, indicators and tools that could provide a basis for developing and agreeing these national measures,

¹⁰ See, eg, Productivity Commission, 2020, *Mental health*, Inquiry report; Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, 2021, *Final report*; Australian Government, 2021, *The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*, pp 69-81.

and significant expertise exists across relevant non-government and research-focused stakeholders that could contribute to this process, as well as within government agencies.

Initial recommendations

Based on the above, and on our other research into current student needs across Australia, Save the Children has developed initial recommendations for the Productivity Commission to consider. We suggest that the next national school reform agreement should:

1. Explicitly recognise the importance of student wellbeing and student engagement as outcomes in their own right, as well as critical enablers for academic learning
2. Include specific national policy initiatives aimed directly at each of student wellbeing and student engagement
3. Include specific performance measures relating to student wellbeing, and significantly more comprehensive performance measures relating to student engagement and student voice, agency and participation
4. Require student wellbeing and engagement to be regularly reported in a form that can be disaggregated to school level and analysed against student learning and attendance data, integrated with the My School website – this could be described as a ‘NAPLAN for wellbeing’¹¹
5. Encompass an explicit emphasis on student voice, agency and participation across all relevant reform directions, initiatives and measurement.

Thank you for considering our submission. If we can provide further information, please contact me or Howard Choo, our Australian Policy and Advocacy Lead, at

Kind regards,

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Save the Children Australia

¹¹ This could build on recommendations made by the Productivity Commission in its inquiry into Mental Health, and the measure in the Commonwealth Government’s 2022-23 Budget to develop a national measure for student wellbeing.

ATTACHMENT – SAVE THE CHILDREN’S SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

Save the Children supports and delivers programs directly in schools to support students’ wellbeing, engagement, learning and development across Australia. Insights and evidence from these programs, and from our involvement with the schools and communities where they operate, have informed our perspective on the school education system and the National School Reform Agreement. Two programs of particular relevance are described below.

Hands on Learning

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 is facilitated by trained artisan-teachers and strengthens students’ capacities, connection to their schools and learning, and sense of meaning and purpose. Participants are students who are at risk of disengagement

Hands on Learning has operated for 23 years and is currently delivered in over 120 primary and secondary schools, mostly in Victoria. The program continued operating throughout the lockdowns and remote learning requirements of the pandemic, responding to the particular challenges that those requirements – and the broader wellbeing impacts of the pandemic – created for student engagement, particularly for students already at risk of disengagement.

A recent review by dandolo (2022) highlighted that 95% of participants finish school or get an apprenticeship or a job. The independent analysis found the program ‘meets a clear need’, ‘is grounded in evidence and demonstrates a commitment to measuring impact’ and has a ‘very low threshold for investment in the program to break even and to deliver a positive return on investment. If only 1.1% of their annual cohort finish school when they wouldn’t have otherwise, they break even.’

Journey of Hope

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 operated continuously in bushfire-affected communities since the immediate response to the Black Summer bushfires ended in 2020. It has also proved effective in supporting student wellbeing and resilience in response to the compounding and separate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program’s impact has been widely recognised. A recent evaluation supported by the University of Melbourne (2021) found that ‘the program was serving critical needs’ and ‘Program participation was associated with statistically significant improvements in students’ report of difficulties in their daily lives, in their attitudes to and relationships with others, and in their use of positive coping strategies ... Based on wider evidence, these psychosocial improvements are also likely to support children’s capacity to learn.’

Across Terms 3 and 4 of 2020 and Terms 1 and 2 of 2021, Journey of Hope reached around 5000 students in around 76 schools across NSW and Victoria, with more in subsequent Terms. The Commonwealth Government has recently recognised and supported the program through funding from the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources for bushfire recovery and the Department of Education, Skills and Employment for COVID-19 response which will significantly expand the program’s reach and impact over coming years. The program is also highlighted in the Commonwealth Government’s National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2021).