

Michael Brennan
Chair
National School Reform Agreement
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
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Dear Michael

Review of the National School Reform Agreement

We are writing to highlight the work of the Restacking the Odds project to identify and apply evidence-based quality indicators for the early years of school. Our work suggests lead indicators of quantity, quality and participation embedded through the performance reporting framework for the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA), have potential to support progress towards achieving the outcomes of the Agreement.

Restacking the Odds aims to drive equitable outcomes by ensuring that children and families can access a combination of high-quality, evidence-informed, community-based services. The initiative is a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health (Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI)), Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Bain & Company.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows us that each year, one in five children start school developmentally vulnerable. Developmental vulnerability in the poorest areas of Australia is three times that of the wealthiest areas. These inequities have not shifted in over a decade. To redress inequities, research tells us that efforts delivered during early childhood (pregnancy to eight years of age) deliver the greatest benefits. Addressing inequity means delivering high quality services to all those who will most benefit.

Restacking the Odds focuses on five evidence-based platforms and programs in early childhood: antenatal care; sustained nurse home visiting; early childhood education and care; parenting programs; and the early years of school (defined as Foundation Year through to Year 3). These five strategies are notably longitudinal (across early childhood), ecological (targeting child and parent), evidence-based, already available in almost all communities, and able to be targeted to benefit the 'bottom 25 per cent'.

The initiative's unique approach uses data and evidence-based indicators to focus on *how* to work differently to improve outcomes for children, families and communities. It develops the skills and knowledge of practitioners, community leaders and government for collecting, understanding and using lead indicators to answer key questions including:

- **Quantity:** Are the strategies available locally in sufficient quantity, relative to the size of the target population?
- **Quality:** Are the strategies delivered effectively relative to evidence-based performance standards?
- **Participation:** Do the targeted children and families participate, and at the right dosage levels?

Our research to date has involved:

- Showing that ‘Stacking’ these five fundamental strategies, (i.e., ensuring they are all applied for a given individual) has a cumulative, positive effect on child development outcomes, measured through reading scores at ages 8-9. The research findings from our analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children are published at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31586934/>
- Developing and applying evidence-based lead indicators for the effective delivery of the five fundamental strategies. Our research and community level work has shown that evidence-based lead indicators can be defined and populated for each strategy and reveal an array of important gaps in services, which can be acted on. Service providers, policymakers and community representatives recognise the data gap and welcome our attempts to address it. An overview of these findings is available at: https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/Restacking_the_Odds/

Lead indicators are essential. They allow service providers and other stakeholders to regularly assess performance and progress, and course-correct when required. While outcome data is the ultimate arbiter of success, lead indicators about which strategies families and children are actually experiencing allow services to make adjustments and accumulate learning regularly, rather than waiting years to see outcomes.

For the **early years of school**, our focus has been on identifying effective strategies to improve quality. Quantity and participation are expected to be in line with state and territory legislation for compulsory schooling.

Currently, there is no national quality framework for schools. Each state and territory has its own framework for improving school quality and performance. Each of the frameworks identifies a range of domains thought to reflect school quality and within each of the domains, may suggest improvement strategies. However, the evaluation tools utilised in existing frameworks have significant limitations. These include overly complex structures, reliance on subjective ratings from school leaders and ambiguity of quality indicators compromising the extent to which they are measurable and modifiable. By contrast, the early childhood education and care sector has a National Quality Standard. This sets a national benchmark for quality across the sector and supports continuous quality improvement.

Restacking the Odds has identified evidence-based quality indicators for the early years of school. These indicators are tied to school processes (i.e. process indicators at the classroom, student or lesson level that contribute to the achievement of high-quality outcomes) and teaching staff competencies (i.e. provider indicators). The full set of indicators and further details on the methodology and findings are outlined in the attached [Communication Brief](#). The full technical report is currently being peer reviewed and is likely to be published in July 2022.

The identification of evidence-based indicators provides a potential framework to guide quality in schools. Populating the indicators gives practitioners data to better understand performance and select quality improvement initiatives. Embedding lead indicators of quality in the NSRA measurement framework has potential to elicit an array of benefits including:

- At the school/classroom level for continuous improvement, including early intervention.
- At the state or system level to inform decisions on resourcing and support for schools and at the regional level to create learning collaboratives to drive systemic change in response to local context.

- Over time, to track how school processes are impacting student outcomes and inform policy responses at the population level.

We are continuing to trial and iterate on the indicators to determine which are pragmatic to collect, resonate with communities, and provide robust measures to stimulate community and government action. Research underway with school leaders is identifying the barriers and enablers of collecting and using data to inform practice. Prototypes will then be developed to enable routine collection and use of relevant data. We note that a detailed cost analysis would provide additional context to inform decisions about program choices, budgets, and strategies.

We would be happy to discuss our work further.

Yours sincerely

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