



NATIONAL STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION

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Independent Schools Australia (ISA) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on Australia's draft National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education as part of a national consultation on Australia's progress against the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

ISA is the peak body representing the Independent schooling sector in Australia. Independent schools are a significant and diverse component of the Australian schooling system. ISA comprises eight member Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), which support over 1,187 Independent schools. The AISs were consulted on the ISA feedback to the National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education.

ISA strongly supports the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" and notes that this goal is reflective of the aims of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration to improve educational outcomes for all young people.

Please find below ISA's comments in relation to the draft National Statement of Commitment and the questions outlined in the consultation fact sheet regarding the impacts of COVID-19, education for the 21st century, Australia's progress against the SDG 4 targets, and public financing of education.

1. DRAFT NATIONAL STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

ISA is broadly supportive of the draft National Statement of Commitment although in its current form it does not refer to the different sectors of education and the participation and contribution of the non-government sector in working towards meeting the SDG 4 targets.

There is limited reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts on students, schools and staff and what is being done to address the on-going issues caused by the pandemic.

2. ENSURING FULL RECOVERY FROM COVID-19 EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION

COVID-19 is highly disruptive to student learning. There has been learning loss, wellbeing concerns and teacher workforce issues due to the pandemic. Australian education, and the Independent school sector, are responding to the changing landscape in an agile manner. Supporting leaders, teachers, staff and students are key concerns of the sector.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF COVID-19-RELATED DISRUPTIONS TO EDUCATION DELIVERY IN AUSTRALIA ON LEARNING LOSS, STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT AND DROPOUT?

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on education delivery in Australia, resulting in learning loss, student disengagement and dropout. The state and territory responses to COVID-19 have varied, as have the Public Health Orders, which have impacted on the provision of education; online and face-to-face. The ability of Australian schools and teachers to adapt to the ever-changing environment during COVID-19 has been key to lowering the risk of learning loss for many students.

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The Independent sector continues to provide innovative responses to support students, families and staff affected by COVID-19 measures and disruptions. Independent schools have continued to lead through rapid change to ensure continuity of educational delivery with student and staff wellbeing at the centre of decision making. Leadership autonomy in Independent schools has enabled each school to determine the needs of their community and find both short and long-term solutions to ongoing disruptions to learning that are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rapid shift to remote and online learning has left significant education gaps for some students due to the lack of face-to-face teaching and relationship building and the effect of recurrent and in some states, prolonged lockdowns. Australian research found that Year 3 students studying math in low ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) schools to be two months behind the progress students made in 2019.¹ However, some students thrived in the online and remote learning environments, and in the same study, it was found that students in mid-ICSEA schools experienced some gains.

Learning loss has been particularly prevalent where play-based learning is key to development, such as preschool and early primary years. Learning loss has also been experienced by some students in junior and senior secondary levels, where self-regulation is a key component of online and remote learning. The return to the classroom has been difficult for some secondary students who experienced an ongoing sense of disconnect from school due to prolonged absence. The concern for return to school has been particularly noted for students in their final year of school.²

COVID-19 disruptions have resulted in the following impacts:

- the loss of skills in today's students will be more apparent in the long term
- experiences of remote learning have varied significantly exposing inequities
- student learning substantially hindered for some
- a negative effect on some students' academic growth
- widening of the achievement gap as students returned to school at different rates
- students who were already experiencing difficulties may have fallen even further behind
- children in at-risk situations and disadvantaged students may have fallen even further behind

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION ON THE WELLBEING OF BOTH LEARNERS AND TEACHERS, INCLUDING AUSTRALIA'S VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS?

COVID-19 disruptions have had a significant impact on the wellbeing of students and teachers. Forty-six per cent of students are at risk of adverse effects on their social and emotional wellbeing due to home-based, online learning.³ For students who have experienced a gap in learning due to disruptions, the impact of the lockdown on teachers and students might not become apparent for some time.⁴ This delay in relation to their peers can place students under significant stress and affect their sense of wellbeing.

¹ J Gore et al., "The Impact of Covid-19 on Student Learning in New South Wales Primary Schools: An Empirical Study," *The Australian Educational Researcher*, no. 48 (2021): 605–37.

² N Brown et al., "Learning at Home during COVID-19: Effects on Vulnerable Young Australians" (Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, University of Tasmania, April 2020), https://www.utas.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1324268/Learning-at-home-during-COVID-19-updated.pdf.

³ Brown et al., "Learning at Home during COVID-19: Effects on Vulnerable Young Australians."

⁴ "Independent Schools and Covid-19: A Story Worth Telling," Independent Schools Victoria, May 31, 2020, <https://is.vic.edu.au/blog/independent-schools-and-covid-19-a-story-worth-telling/>.

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Disadvantaged and vulnerable students

The effect of educational disruption on disadvantaged and vulnerable students due to COVID-19 have been significant across the sector, but particularly in specialist settings such as boarding schools, special assistance schools for young people at risk or disengaged from schooling, and special schools for students with disability.

For some very vulnerable students, school is their main safe place, therefore lockdowns had a negative impact on these young people. Students with specific wellbeing needs may have experienced temporary disconnection with essential services which would usually occur via the school. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where there was restricted access, learning and teacher support was significantly impacted as visitors could not enter the community.

There has been a decrease in student's mental health and wellbeing due to:

- increased social isolation
- the inability of teachers to provide physical support and engagement
- many children witnessing their parents worrying about finances, illness or death
- many children witnessing or experiencing domestic violence

The increased workload for teachers as they had to rapidly find and implement viable alternatives to the traditional model of teaching caused additional stress. As children of critical workers or vulnerable families were allowed to attend school, some teachers were expected to teach in 'dual modes' which also stretched their capacity.

At Carinity Southside in Queensland, an Independent special assistance school, many young people come to school with complex trauma and adverse childhood experiences. The provision of online learning during lockdown was highly problematic as many of the students did not have access to devices or the internet, or the parental support to support online learning. Instead, the school hand delivered learning packs to students. This gap in returning to face-to-face teaching meant that when lockdown lifted, there was a significant amount of work getting students back to learning and performing academically and having positive social-emotional outcomes.

Wellbeing

In a 2020 study, teachers were asked to choose the top three concerns about distance learning on students, and educators ranked students' social needs above learning loss.⁵ Wellbeing is a key concern for Independent schools, and many AISs have student wellbeing programs for schools as part of their professional learning suite.⁶

Wellbeing concerns were also apparent for students with disability, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students, regional, rural and remote students, students in out of home care, students involved in the justice system, and students where the primary wage earner lost employment due to COVID-19. For these students, the barriers to accessing education during COVID-19 was greater than for the general student population.

In May 2022, ISA published a commissioned report titled, *Student and staff wellbeing and mental health*. This report found that although Australia has a well-deserved reputation for delivering education programs that support the wellbeing and mental health of students, pandemic disruptions to learning has significantly increased the need to protect and support students and staff. Independent

⁵ Clare Buckley Flack et al., "Educator Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19 on Teaching and Learning in Australia and New Zealand," 2020, https://pivotpl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Pivot_StateofEducation_2020_White-Paper.pdf.

⁶ Independent Schools Victoria, "COVID-19 and Its Impact on Mental Health," December 1, 2021, <https://is.vic.edu.au/research-post/mental-health/>; Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, "Whole-School Wellbeing," accessed July 29, 2022, <https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/learning-from-home/wellbeing>.

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schools have invested in the health and professional development of their staff to support the wellbeing of students; however, ISA research and experience shows more is required as poor wellbeing affects school attendance, learning and academic outcomes. Stressors are also linked to sleep, amount of time spent online and physical activity.

Teachers

Lockdowns isolated teachers from their colleagues and students, and many were expected to learn about online and remote learning delivery in a short time frame. Some schools were very well prepared for remote learning while others had significant implementation challenges. Different levels of access to technology and devices resulted in disruption to learning and engagement. For many teachers, online and remote learning was new and teaching remotely was a unique and challenging experience for many.

AISs supported schools and teachers with online delivery professional learning as well as managing barriers to information technology for students and parents/carers. Additional resources provided by AISs to mitigate the effects of learning loss for students included resources on:

- Engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing
- Hybrid learning
- Promoting student learning engagement in an online learning environment
- Digital learning practices during remote learning and beyond
- Transitioning back to school
- Selecting teaching and learning resources for online learning
- Safe learning environments for video conferencing
- Continuous learning for parents and students
- Leading Online Teaching and Learning

Independent schools employed a range of strategies to increase student and parent/carer engagement in the return to face-to-face teaching, including encouraging parents and carers to reach out to school staff,⁷ and home-school partnerships which led to more positive outcomes in engagement with student learning and wellbeing.⁸

In addition to the complexities of managing the move to online learning, during 2019 and 2020, repeated lockdowns, mandated vaccinations for teachers and mask wearing in schools made it difficult for some schools to maintain staff and fill relief staff shortages. This was most keenly felt in the states experiencing the longest lockdowns, particularly Victoria and New South Wales.

While there has not been a lockdown for some time, education delivery continues to be disrupted with significant staff shortages due to COVID-19 isolation and other illness, and a diminishing pool of relief teachers. Teachers are feeling the ongoing weight of continued disruption, filling in for their colleagues and teaching extra classes and subjects. This has an impact on both teachers and students.

Independent schools are finding creative solutions to manage staffing shortages; however, the impacts are ongoing with school leaders filling teaching gaps as best they can to minimise disruption to learning.

⁷ Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, "Returning to On-Campus Learning: Wellbeing Considerations," September 2021,

<https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Course%20and%20Conference%20Materials/Wellbeing%20Pre%20Return%20to%20Schools%20Page%201%20updated%20Sept%202021.pdf>.

⁸ Independent Schools Queensland, "Reflections on Teaching and Learning during COVID-19 in Queensland Independent Schools," n.d., <https://www.isq.qld.edu.au/media/wx1drmwu/reflections-on-tandl-during-covid-19.pdf>.

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School leaders

Research by Independent Schools Victoria indicated that 48 per cent of principal's concerns during COVID-19 were their own burnout, self-care, social isolation, and exhaustion. Twenty-one per cent of principals indicated that guidance on the leadership of student and staff wellbeing support and mental health, were a key concern.⁹ In many Independent schools, principals were called upon to enact public health orders such as vaccination mandates. This placed some principals under additional stress, particularly if the directives resulted in standing down staff, or staff terminations.

Managing vulnerable staff and students was extremely difficult for school leaders. This includes staff and students who have pre-existing medical conditions that makes them more susceptible to the acute effects of COVID-19, as well as those with vulnerable family members. This concern continues while the virus remains prevalent in schools and communities. School leaders are often called upon as advocates for vulnerable students and teachers.

Some AISs have noted the significant amount of support being provided to leaders during the pandemic, including support around school closures and managing personal and family health risks. For many school leaders there are additional pressures to accommodate the competing priorities between health orders and staff, which has resulted in some leaders experiencing burnout. Additionally, managing community expectations when there are often diverse parent views about vaccinations and mask wearing has created further stress on school leaders, especially when the mandates lifted, and school leaders were responsible for their own school response.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE TO DATE TO RECOVER PANDEMIC-RELATED LOSSES?

Independent schools have embraced the return to face-to-face instruction. However, wellbeing and learning loss remains a key concern for all schools. While teachers know their students and therefore can target individual needs, disruption is ongoing and therefore the actual losses related to the pandemic are not yet clear. Teachers will require support and resources to enable students to recover from learning loss, with wellbeing issues needing to be addressed in tandem.

Independent schools are offering a range of additional academic supports to address learning losses. These include after school or lunch time classes, additional learning aides in classes and special assistance classes that run alongside regular classes. In response to increased wellbeing and social-emotional concerns, some schools offer counselling to students and training teachers in supporting students through the transition back into the classroom.

AISs provide professional learning in targeted areas that also responds to the effects of COVID-19, such as:

- Mental health targeted, intensive, and universal supports
- Specialist conferences and symposium such as boarding, religion, sports, and research
- High impact pedagogical strategies
- Supporting anxious students

Independent schools are still experiencing the impacts of COVID-19 particularly with the Omicron variant affecting workforce numbers. Some schools have had to combine classes and a small number have had to move classes back online due to a rise in cases. Hybrid teaching has become an important part of flexible delivery to keep students engaged in learning while away from school. Independent schools are well placed to move to hybrid modes of delivery due to their response to remote and online learning during the earlier waves of COVID-19, however this model of delivery still places schools under additional pressure.

⁹ Independent Schools Victoria, "A Slow Burning Fuse? COVID-19 and Its Impacts on the Mental Health of School Communities," December 2021, <https://is.vic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ISV-Mental-health-and-wellbeing.pdf>.

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DO YOU PROPOSE ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO SUPPORT FURTHER RECOVERY IN THE SHORT- OR MEDIUM-TERM?

Recovery measures need to be responsive to school and community contexts and the level of disrupted educational delivery. Providing school leaders with targeted resources where large groups of students are identified as disadvantaged would support recovery measures. This could address immediate short-term measures, so these students do not fall further behind.

School leaders

Allowing school leaders to identify their own specific needs rather than a national blanket approach is important. Leaders in Independent schools are well placed to offer support for their school community, however, to maintain this role, they also must receive support. Providing additional support to leaders through measures such as coaching, counselling, and professional learning would help them to continue to support their schools.

Wellbeing

Continued support for measures for student and staff wellbeing is of key importance. This includes ongoing access to counselling and mental health support for both staff and students, as well as directed learning about self-care and peer support.

It is important all students' attendance, learning progress and behaviour is monitored, particularly those students most at risk of learning loss and experiencing wellbeing concerns. Transition plans at a whole-school level would assist schools to manage student progress as they return to face to face teaching.

Data

Data is an important measure of how well the schooling system is doing in response to the ongoing impact of COVID-19. Ongoing monitoring of wellbeing is a key area in the transition to living with COVID-19 for the near future. Many schools in the Independent sector have implemented a measure to track student well-being. Schools also monitor and report on attendance and act quickly on prolonged student absenteeism.

3. STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND LEVERS FOR REIMAGINING EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

WHAT ASPECTS OF EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO CONTINUE, STRENGTHEN AND/OR SAFEGUARD?

Through consultation, the Independent sector has identified the following areas as key elements of education in Australian education to be continued and strengthened. Together with a focus on the student and their learning journey, students gain and develop the skills, attributes and competencies needed to navigate an ever-changing world.

- Inclusive education
- Assessment
- Positive student-staff relationships
- Wellbeing
- Digital capacity

Inclusive education

Australia is a leader in inclusive, accessible, and high-quality education for all young people. Independent schools play a key role in providing a quality education for priority groups such as

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students.

In 2021, nineteen per cent of enrolments at Independent schools were students with disability, and 2.5 per cent of enrolments in the Independent sector were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁰ In 2021, there were 138 special schools accounting for 11.6 per cent of all Independent schools. There were also 10 majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment Independent schools in 2021 in the Northern Territory. The number of majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Independent schools in the Northern Territory represents 37 per cent of Independent schools in the territory. The Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents among its population – an estimated 32 per cent.

Through specialist schools such as special schools and majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, the Independent sector provides high-quality education to a diverse cohort of students. The provision of culturally safe curriculum and teaching staff alongside strong connections to the community enhances educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Similarly, making reasonable adjustments for learning for students with disability is a core component for inclusion. A continued focus on inclusion, equity and cultural safety will strengthen education for the 21st century.

Assessment

Quantitative assessment is currently the cornerstone of international and national benchmarking. Examples include the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Although the data from these assessments can be useful, it is limited. Embracing qualitative assessment approaches to capture the breadth of student performance might be strengthened alongside the quantitative assessment measures.

Student-staff relationships

Through COVID-19 Australia has demonstrated resilient staff-student relationships. Positive teacher-student relationships affect positive intellectual engagement and motivation to perform well academically.¹¹ AISs support schools in developing positive relationships through professional learning, including:

- Teacher Aides Working with Students with Disability
- Behaviour Support
- Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives

Safeguarding the work undertaken by Independent schools to develop and maintain student-teacher relationships through the pandemic is important to improving student performance, and teacher wellbeing.

¹⁰ Independent Schools Australia, "At a Glance 2022 Edition," 2022, https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ISA_A4_AT-A-GLANCE-2022-2.pdf.

¹¹ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, "Positive Teacher-Student Relationships" (NSW Department of Education, February 26, 2021), <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/tell-them-from-me/accessing-and-using-tell-them-from-me-data/tell-them-from-me-measures/positive-teacher-student-relationships.html>.

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Wellbeing

An Independent sector survey showed that around 90 per cent of Independent schools have wellbeing programs in place.¹² The number and variety of these programs range from ‘big brother/big sister’ schemes; dedicated ‘wellbeing times’ during the day; student wellbeing committees and more structured programs.¹³ Strengthening wellbeing is a key concern for Independent schools. Independent sector research also showed that the most significant negative impacts on student wellbeing are related to family conflict or breakdown. Other negative impacts were bullying, the health of loved ones, their popularity, their friends, and peer pressures.¹⁴

At a national level, wellbeing is also of particular concern, resulting in significant government funding being provided to initiatives for young people, including professional learning for teachers about wellbeing and mental health through Beyond Blue. There has also been funding provided to counselling services such as Head Space. Where possible, AISs and Independent schools also direct funding into wellbeing programs such as the provision of school counsellors and psychologists.

School can be a place of safety for many students and can act as a preventative measure for wellbeing issues, as well as a place for proactive measures. Prevention is important for schools and continuing to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing curriculum would help focus efforts in this area.

Digital capacity

Access to the online learning environment became an equity concern during COVID-19. Ensuring equitable access to online learning materials, bandwidth and technologies could go some way to strengthening the Sustainability Development Goals.

Other

There are additional aspects of education that are important to continue, strengthen and/or safeguard:

- focusing on continual improvement and monitoring the achievement of improvement goals, such as the Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Education Declaration (see below).
- creating caring, nurturing environments
- being student-focused
- a deep belief that every student is capable of successful learning, inclusive practice
- students actively engaging with their learning
- having high expectations of students and ensuring they have student voice
- providing students with excellent teachers who deliver relevant and engaging lessons

CAN YOU IDENTIFY ANY NEW POSSIBILITIES OR DIRECTIONS FOR EDUCATION THAT HAVE ONLY RECENTLY BECOME APPARENT?

The shift to remote and online learning due to the pandemic means that many schools are now more comfortable and practised at delivering online teaching and learning. While most schools’ preference is to return fully to face-to-face learning, this new-found familiarity makes it possible for some schools to investigate the provision of a blended learning model in the future, and to incorporate digital and online learning into existing practise.

¹² “Student Wellbeing: It’s in Good Hands,” Independent Schools Victoria, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://is.vic.edu.au/blog/student-wellbeing-its-in-good-hands/>.

¹³ “Student Wellbeing.”

¹⁴ “Student Wellbeing.”

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One of the enduring educational legacies of the pandemic may well be an awareness of the need to equip all schools with digital platforms and tools for distance learning and to train and provide teachers with the skills required to operate in an accelerated digital environment so that these capabilities are retained and can be utilised in adapting to a changing educational environment

Equity of access to devices and bandwidth to enable online learning for students was also an issue during lockdown and while schools and governments tried various means of addressing these issues, for many low socio-economic and disadvantaged students and families, the barriers were insurmountable.

WHAT ARE SOME INNOVATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS FOR EDUCATION THAT AUSTRALIA SHOULD EMBRACE?

The Senior Secondary Pathways Review moves beyond the scores to focus on learner profiles. The findings recognise that ‘young people will need a broad base of skills, values and knowledge to become successful lifelong learners. Students also need to leave school with the essential life attributes to become productive members of the community.’¹⁵

The newly signed Preschool Reform Agreement is a way to improve the outcomes and attendance of students in the year before formal schooling. Under the agreement, funding will follow the child and is intended to mitigate some of the inequities of accessing preschool education for priority groups such as students with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As noted earlier, special assistance schools cater for at risk young people who have become disengaged from formal mainstream schooling. These schools have excellent wrap around support measures and some of their strategies could be leveraged for education transformation. For example, at Hester Hornbrook Academy, an Independent special assistance school in Victoria, the Living Learning program is an intensive, flexible, educational program for students experiencing mental health challenges. With both a teacher and youth worker in every classroom, students are supported in all aspects of life through building strong, positive relationships.¹⁶

Teachers

To reimagine education for the 21st century, Australia could:

- empower teachers through uplifting professionalism, agency, and salaries
- create further expert teacher career paths
- have real-time performance data to allow teachers to adjust to the needs of learners through projects such as the Online Formative Assessment Initiative, which has the potential to be impactful on teaching and learning
- provide further incentives for teachers to teach in rural and remote locations
- provide further incentives for people to make teaching a career of choice by creating a national model of teacher supply and demand to support a sustainable pipeline of high-quality teachers in the right subject areas and locations¹⁷

¹⁵ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, “Looking to the Future: Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training,” 2021, <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/looking-future-report-review-senior-secondary-pathways-work-further-education-and-training>.

¹⁶ Hester Hornbrook Academy, “Living Learning,” accessed August 2, 2022, <https://www.mcm.org.au/services/learning/support-to-finish-school>.

¹⁷ Department of Education, Skills and Employment Skills and Employment, “Quality Initial Teacher Education Review,” Quality Initial Teacher Education, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://qitereview.dese.gov.au/>.

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When implementing new reforms it is critical to be mindful of teacher workload and reduce some measures and administrative requirements, when adding on new ones

CAN YOU IDENTIFY ANY GROUPS, BODIES OR FORUMS THAT CAN BE LEVERAGED OR CAN LEAD ON EDUCATION TRANSFORMATIONS IN AUSTRALIA?

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) – as a leader in teacher standards and professional benchmarking, AITSL could lead transformations in professional learning and promoting inclusive education.
- Grattan Institute – as a leader in educational research, the Grattan Institute could lead innovative research directions that might reflect the needs of the teaching profession, including workforce shortages.
- Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) – as the new leader in translating research into practice, AERO might provide a vehicle to informing the sector about educational transformation through research-led practice.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) - Rethinking assessment (global group) – the OECD might debunk the perceived tensions between classroom-based assessments, and summative tests.
- Tertiary education providers - as university, employment, vocational education and other post-school destinations are a central aspect of schooling outcomes, developing relationships and partnerships with these providers are important to lead on education transformations.
- Health sector – wellbeing is a key consideration for education in the 21st century. There is a substantial amount of interconnectedness between the health sector and education. Leveraging these relationships could significantly strengthen preventative education, releasing pressure on both the education and health sectors.

4. REVIEWING NATIONAL EDUCATION TARGETS AND BENCHMARKS

Australia has made some gains in meeting the SDG 4 targets for the general student population however there is still some work to be done on the teacher shortages and meeting the targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON AUSTRALIA'S PROGRESS IN MEETING THE SDG 4 TARGETS?

ISA supports the targets and suggests that the Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Education Declaration embodies the targets and that the Declaration be a document that drives the work in schools to ensure that Australia is on track in meeting the SDG 4 targets.

Target 4.2

Regarding target 4.2.1, the AEDC data shows the percentage of children who were on track on 5 domains decreased for the first time since 2009 (from 55.4 per cent in 2018 to 54.8 per cent in 2021).¹⁸ Moreover, despite over 95 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being enrolled in preschool, according to the recent Closing the Gap report, the number of Aboriginal and

¹⁸ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, "2021 Australian Early Development Census," Text, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.dese.gov.au/early-childhood/announcements/report-now-available-2021-australian-early-development-census>.

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Torres Strait Islander children who are developmentally on track has decreased to 34.3 per cent.¹⁹ Australia still has some way to go to meet target 4.2 for all children.

The new Preschool Reform Agreement has been signed by all states and territories. Part of this agreement is attendance targets and an outcomes measure. Developing the agreement's measure and targets will be important in meeting the SDG 4.2 target.

Target 4.6

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a key assessment of literacy and numeracy benchmarking in Australia. According to the 2021 NAPLAN report, the number of Year 9 students at or above the national minimum standard in reading dropped by 2.1 per cent between 2019 and 2021. Similarly, the number of students at or above the national minimum standard in numeracy reduced by 1.3 per cent between 2019 and 2021.²⁰ These decreases could be accounted for by COVID-19 and education losses during this time. Overall, Australia is showing satisfactory progress towards target 4.6 for the general student population. However, there are still significant differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous achievement levels in NAPLAN.

Target 4.7

Australia recently released the new Australian Curriculum, v.0.9. The curriculum includes a focus on sustainability as a cross-curriculum priority. This priority includes developing young people's knowledge and skills to engage in climate change, resources, cultural and language diversity, and biodiversity loss. The new curriculum also engages students in global citizenship through the general capabilities of intercultural understanding, ethical understanding, and personal and social capability. As this new curriculum is being adopted by all schools in Australia, the country is on track to meeting target 4.7.

Target 4.c

Teacher supply is a significant issue in Australia. This has become particularly pronounced during COVID-19 and is experienced disproportionately in regional, rural and remote locations. These shortages place a significant demand on attracting high-quality candidates. According to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, these shortages are also significant in math and science.²¹ Shortages result in the risk of student learning loss, especially for staff teaching out of area.

The Independent sector, like all sectors in Australia, is struggling with staff shortages. There are not enough teachers to fill relief, contract and permanent positions. Overall, Australia is not on track to meet target 4.c and this places the future education of Australia's young people at risk.

There is some work being undertaken to encourage up-skilling early childhood educators, those teachers teaching out-of-area and to re-engage teachers who have left the profession. It is hoped that these efforts, alongside efforts by Initial Teacher Education providers will go some way to mitigating the effects of a shrinking workforce.

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, "Closing the Gap Information Repository," July 28, 2022, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report>.

²⁰ National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, "National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy Report for 2021," 2021, <https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports>.

²¹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, "Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review," 2022, <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/resources/next-steps-report-quality-initial-teacher-education-review>.

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CAN YOU IDENTIFY WAYS OF ACCELERATING PROGRESS TOWARDS MEETING THE TARGETS?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities as it has highlighted the ongoing need to support student and staff wellbeing. Addressing this need will be crucial for Australia to make progress in meeting the SDG 4 targets.

There are additional aspects for accelerating progress towards meeting the targets:

- all schools must have a whole school approach to supporting student learning and wellbeing
- school leaders must prioritise professional development for educators in priority areas including best practices to use support staff
- allied health professionals must be employed at schools to support students, teachers and school leaders
- schools must have a targeted focus on inclusive practice to ensure equity for all students

Assessment

Some of the assessment regimes drive what happens in schools and encompasses a one size fits all solution. Re-thinking some of the State-wide and national assessments might be a way forward. Additionally, changing the prevailing narrative around assessment in schools will involve action at both the school, systemic and community level to influence community perceptions and expectations of the purpose of schooling.

Inclusion

Inclusion and catering for students with disability is intrinsic to the education provided by Independent schools. At the national policy level, ISA engages in a range of government initiatives on students with disability including the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability, and the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

AISs noted the importance of teacher education courses at universities prioritising the development of pre-service teachers' understanding and knowledge of disabilities, how to differentiate for students with additional needs and how to personalise planning. Furthermore, there needs to be a whole of school inclusive approach to working with students with additional needs. School curriculum leaders, learning support staff, teachers and parents need to work collaboratively to ensure that the appropriate and necessary adjustments are being made for students with additional needs.

Teachers

Given the gap between the general student population in literacy and numeracy, and the early childhood targets, targeting initial teacher education and teacher professional learning in addressing equity groups might be a way forward. AISs offer professional learning in teaching equity groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students. Universities also offer discrete units as part of the core Initial Teacher Education curriculum. It is important to continue to strengthen these pathways to promote Australia's progress towards meeting the SDG targets.

ARE THERE ANY OPPORTUNITIES TO REVIEW, DEFINE OR EVALUATE TARGETS AND BENCHMARKS?

A regular cycle of review and renewal is an intrinsic part of all the key documents that set out the targets and benchmarks for Australian education, including the Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Education Declaration, the National School Reform Agreement, the Preschool Reform Agreement and the National Assessment Program.

- The Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Education Declaration builds on the previous Melbourne Declaration and sets a new agenda for Australian education

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- The National School Reform Agreement is currently under review
- The National Measurement Framework is also regularly reviewed by ACARA, and this will occur after the completion of the review of the NSRA
- The Preschool Reform Agreement builds on previous national agreements and National Partnerships.

What could be built into these processes is a greater role for the non-government sector in the development of many of these national frameworks. Non-government sector enrolments make up one third of the school sector however the ability of the sector to input into decision making at the national level in relation to not only schooling, but also early childhood education, is limited.

5. ENSURING STRENGTHENED AND SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC FINANCING OF EDUCATION

CAN YOU IDENTIFY ANY INNOVATIVE MODELS OR MECHANISMS FOR FINANCING EDUCATION?

ISA is of the view that the current national funding model strikes an appropriate balance between addressing need and disadvantage and recognising the need for stable and predictable funding that enable schools to plan effectively and with certainty.

The new Direct Measure of Income (DMI) methodology, which is used to assess parental capacity to contribute, uses the personal tax income data of parents and guardians to calculate the median income in a school. This is possible through linking the names and addresses of students' parents and guardians from non-government schools to personal income tax records as part of the Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP), a secure ABS data environment which enables linkages between large government data sets. MADIP also enables the linkage of a range of other administrative data sets including a range of other government payments. This is a new approach to the use of administrative data in funding.

HOW EFFECTIVELY DOES AUSTRALIA'S DOMESTIC EDUCATION FUNDING ADDRESS EQUITY ISSUES?

It is the view of the Independent sector that the current Australian Government funding model works well in addressing areas of disadvantage and promoting equity.

While Independent schools are mostly funded by parents and communities, the Australian Government is the main source of government funding for Independent schools. Australian Government recurrent funding of schools is delivered through the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding model. The SRS funding model provides base funding with additional loadings to address disadvantage for all students in all sectors of education.

The SRS is an estimate of how much total public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs. Under the SRS funding model, the Australian Government share of funding for government schools is set at 20 per cent of the total SRS (base + loadings) and for non-government schools (Independent and Catholic schools), the Australian Government share is set at 80 per cent of the total SRS (base + loadings).

Under bilateral agreements negotiated between state and territory governments and the Australian Government, state and territory governments have agreed to fund the remaining 20 per cent, or a lower agreed percentage of the total SRS (base + loadings) for non-government schools

The loadings for students in priority cohorts and disadvantaged schools are aimed at addressing specific areas of educational disadvantage and are fully publicly funded. These are:

- School size
- School location
- Low socio-educational advantage

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- Students with disability
- English language proficiency
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The loadings provide needs-based funding to address areas of disadvantage and provide schools with the means to provide additional assistance to students, to make classroom adjustments and to help students in regional or remote locations access quality education.

The funding model considers the fact that at non-government schools, parents pay fees. Government schools are entitled to receive the full amount of the base funding, whereas base funding for non-government schools is adjusted according to 'capacity to contribute'. Capacity to contribute (CTC) is a measure of the school community's capacity to contribute to the school's operating costs.

Capacity to contribute is now measured using the Direct Measure of Income (DMI) methodology. As noted above, the DMI methodology uses the personal tax income data of parents and guardians to calculate the median income in a school, which is used to determine the CTC score and associated funding levels for a school. This means that schools base funding is adjusted depending on the capacity of the parents to pay school fees.

CTC-exempt non-government schools, such as special schools, special assistance schools, majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student schools and remote 'sole provider' schools, are entitled to receive the full base funding amount because they serve highly disadvantaged students and communities.

The state and territory funding models differ, and the way funding is distributed according to need also differ. Some jurisdictions use the SRS funding model and others rely on their own methodologies. It is also worth noting that school system authorities, such as the government, Catholic and the smaller Independent school systems, can decide how to distribute Australian Government funding to individual schools in the system according to an approved needs-based methodology.