



2023-24 BUDGET SUBMISSION

DATE 27 JANUARY 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Through the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), ISA represents 1,187 schools and over 667,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. The latest available data shows that one in six Australian school students attends an Independent school with more than one in five secondary students attending an Independent school.

Independent schools cater for a range of communities with many students educated in regional and remote locations and in settings which are distinctive to the Independent sector, such as boarding schools and Special Assistance Schools. Independent schools offer a range of educational experiences and services that are not readily available from other providers.

Independent schools make a valuable contribution to education in Australia. They are long-established partners in Australia's education system, alongside government and Catholic schools, contributing to society and the learning and wellbeing of Australian children.

Independent schools are committed to playing their part in improving educational opportunities for young Australians and contributing to a robust and successful national schooling system.

Consequently, ISA welcomes the opportunity to put forward our priorities for the 2023-24 Federal Budget.

2. KEY POINTS

For many decades, the non-government sector has been funded to assist in implementing national programs and priorities that strengthen Australia's system of education. This support is particularly important given Independent schools do not have access to the centralised support mechanisms that are available to government and Catholic systemic schools. This means that the administrative and resourcing impacts of implementing national reforms and any subsequent reporting and accountability requirements fall directly on individual schools.

Given these constraints, significant levels of support are required for the Independent sector to fully participate in the adoption of any current and new initiatives.

The Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) in each state and territory have a long history of successfully supporting schools to implement Commonwealth priorities, initially through the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS), through a range of Commonwealth Targeted Programs (CTPs), the Student First Support Fund and now through the Non-Government Reform Support Fund (NGRSF).

The continuation of the current NGRSF is critical to the provision of on-going support for Independent schools if the sector is to continue to deliver on existing and new national priorities.

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We ask that at least an equivalent level (\$17 million per year) of funding be provided through the Budget to the Independent school sector for the proposed one-year extension of the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) in 2024 and for the duration of the next NSRA.

3. NON-GOVERNMENT REFORM SUPPORT FUND

During 2017, the Australian Government amended the Australian Education Act 2013 with the intention of ensuring consistent Australian Government school funding across states and territories and the non-government sector. At this time, the Government announced the Non-government Reform Support Fund (NGRSF) to be provided to non-government school representative bodies.

The NGRSF commenced 1 January 2018. It provides \$200 million over five years from 2018 to 2022 for NGRBs to support the implementation of existing and new national policy initiatives and state-specific reforms outlined in the National School Reform Agreement and Bilateral Agreements, in non-government schools. During this five-year period, a total of \$85 million was allocated to AISs for their use in providing services to all Independent schools.

AISs were required to provide a strategic plan covering the years 2018-2022 and yearly work plans for the expenditure of this funding centred on three key national priorities:

- quality assurance, moderation, and support for the continued improvement of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD)
- transition of NAPLAN to online delivery
- improving governance and financial management practices in non-government schools to strengthen financial viability, improve business decision making and build resilience to mitigate unforeseen circumstances.

Much of this work is still on-going. While transition to NAPLAN Online is nearly complete, staff movement necessitates ongoing support to ensure all students participate successfully in the testing program. On-going support for the NCCD and improving governance and financial management practices in schools are both areas where demand for assistance will also continue.

In recognition of the on-going need for support for Independent schools in relation to the national priorities, in the 2022-23 Federal Budget funding for the NGRSF was extended for an additional year to 2023. The further extension of the current NSRA for 2024 necessitates the concomitant extension of the current NGRSF given that the achievement of the priorities is only possible in the Independent sector if the NGRSF is provided to support the necessary work.

See [Appendix 1](#) for the history of funding support for reform.

4. THE ROLE OF AISs

The wide variety of programs, resources and advice provided by AISs under the NGRSF have made a positive difference to students and their families, teachers, school leaders and the communities they serve.

Funding overarching sector support through NGRBs to meet agreed reform priorities, collect data, and facilitate evaluation and measurement processes creates considerable efficiencies and minimises the requirement for Commonwealth or state/territory government effort to engage in new arrangements to support Independent schools to achieve desired reforms.

The AISs, as NGRBs, are uniquely placed and experienced in providing expert assistance to Independent schools. The AISs know their schools, have trusted relationships with leaders and staff and understand the needs and strengths of Independent schools.

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The AISs also have demonstrated experience in the delivery of professional development and understand what works, what resources are effective, how to introduce sustainable, whole school improvement and what modes of training to use in delivering on the national priorities.

5. THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS REFORM AGREEMENT AND THE COSTS OF REFORM

The National School Reform Agreement (NSRA), agreed to by the Australian Government and the states and territories, sets out the national education reform agenda through a series of National Priority Initiatives (NPIs) for the entire school sector. The NSRA is accompanied by a series of Bilateral Agreements between the Australian Government and the states and territories which set out additional jurisdictional priorities. These are priorities for all schools and sectors.

To date, AISs have been able to provide the support needed for Independent schools to address desired reforms because of the provision of the NGRSF.

Without the efficiencies the NGRBs provide, the costs of implementing desired reforms and of the required reporting to meet accountability requirements would fall directly on schools and on government Departments. Priorities that require Independent sector involvement often come with significant challenges and the administrative burden for schools, even under current arrangements, can be high.

Following the recent Education Minister's Meeting in December 2022, it was announced there would be an extension of the current NSRA and Bilateral Agreements for 12 months to allow for a review of the NSRA to be undertaken by a panel of eminent Australians. This review is in addition to the now completed Productivity Commission review of the NSRA.

The Productivity Commission review has recommended redesigning the next NSRA to focus more on priorities such as lifting academic results for all students, supporting quality teaching and school leadership, and student wellbeing as well as increasing transparency and accountability. With the introduction of any new priority reforms, it will be critical the AISs, as the Independent sector's representative bodies, continue to provide professional expertise and support to schools to assist in the adoption of new initiatives and reforms.

At the national level, ongoing participation in consultations, working groups etc will also be essential to ensure national priorities and reforms are a focus in the Independent sector. This is only able to happen with the assistance of the NGRSF.

It should also be recognised that ISA, AISs and Independent schools are active participants in reform initiatives in addition to the support facilitated through the NGRSF. The sector has contributed to:

- The development of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan
- The piloting and shaping of the USI
- The development of the Online Formative Assessment Initiative
- Initiatives arising from *Looking to the Future: Report of the Review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training* including the Learner Profiles
- Participation in the Post-School Destinations Survey
- Initiatives to strengthening the initial teacher education accreditation system.

6. CONCLUSION

There are Australian Government reforms and priority reforms from the current NSRA that are predicated on participation by all education sectors. These reforms will continue to require significant engagement by Independent schools and potentially impose a significant burden on Independent schools.

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Additionally, the Productivity Commission's review of the NSRA has recommended the continuation of a strong national reform agenda focussing on key issues for Australian schooling. It is highly likely that the review to be undertaken by a panel of eminent Australians will make further recommendations for reform.

Significant support will be required to enable Independent sector participation in these reforms and AISs are best placed to deliver that support, based on decades of delivery of expert support and guidance and effective professional learning to Independent schools.

The continuation of the Non-Government Reform Support Fund, as well as assisting individual schools to meet their regulatory obligations, will ensure that Independent schools are able to fully participate in key national reforms as well as continuing their participation in state and territory bilateral reform objectives.

We ask that at least an equivalent level (\$17 million per year) of funding be provided through the Budget to the Independent school sector for the proposed one-year extension of the current National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) in 2024 and for the duration of the next NSRA.

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APPENDIX 1 – HISTORY OF FUNDING SUPPORT FOR REFORM IN THE INDEPENDENT SECTOR

Begun in 1993, and fully introduced in 1994, the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS) subsumed many of the previous targeted programs that aimed to remove educational disadvantage. These included English As, A Second Language, Special Education, Disadvantaged Schools, Country Areas, Literacy and Learning, Students at Risk, Gifted and Talented, Gender Equity and Students with Disabilities programs.

The broad goals of the NEPS were to maximise educational outcomes for students in equity target groups, to ensure that the range of outcomes for these school students approached those for the school-age population, and to lift the educational attainment of all target groups.

For Independent schools, the NEPS marked a major change in the approach to funding these targeted programs. For the first time, targeted programs were funded by Australian Government grants to Associations of Independent Schools, who in turn managed the programs for schools.

Australian Government programs to address disadvantage continued to be administered by state and territory Associations of Independent Schools as Commonwealth Target Programs (CTPs) until 2013.

Following the Review of Funding for Schooling undertaken by David Gonski AC during 2010 and 2011, the structure of Australian Government funding for non-government schools (recurrent funding plus targeted funding) was replaced in 2014 by the Schooling Resource Standard model which comprised base funding plus loadings to address disadvantage. The loadings were incorporated into the funding provided directly to schools, removing any role for AISs in their administration.

STUDENTS FIRST SUPPORT FUND

In recognition of the role played by AISs in supporting Australian Government reform initiatives and supporting Independent schools in the implementation of government programs, the Australian Government initiated the Students First Support Fund (SFSF). Funding under the SFSF was also made available to the Catholic sector with both AISs and Catholic Education Commissions recognised as Non-Government Representative Bodies (NGRBs) under the Australian Education Act 2013.

The SFSF provided \$155 million over the four years from 2014 – 2017. Of these funds, \$100 million was paid by the Commonwealth directly to AISs to provide services to Independent schools across five priority areas:

- improving quality teaching
- improving quality learning
- empowering school leadership
- meeting student need (including supporting Indigenous students and students with a disability)
- improving transparency and accountability.

The Australian Government undertook an independent Review of the Students First Support Fund in 2016-2017. In relation to Strategy and Governance, the Review recommended a 'system' role for NGRBs in line with school autonomy and State and Territory jurisdictional roles, clearer line of sight between national priorities, measures, resources and actions, and fewer priorities and relative stability in the priorities and indicators of success.

NON GOVERNMENT REFORM SUPPORT FUND

The NGSRF subsequently commenced 1 January 2018.