

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY ON THE NATIONAL SCHOOLING REFORM AGREEMENT

(NRSA)

PRESS RELEASE 954

[A Productivity Commission interim report released in early September](#) found new initiatives were needed to raise academic outcomes, boost student wellbeing, address vast education equity gaps and improve quality teaching.

Productivity Commissioner Natalie Siegel-Brown said reforms signed in 2018 had made little or no impact on student outcomes.

“Performance has flatlined. Despite an increase in funding, there has been no steep change in outcomes,” she said.

Referring to the report, she said that Australians persistently fall short of the ideal of an equitable education for all students. Every year, between 5 and 9 per cent of Australian students do not meet year-level expectations in either literacy or numeracy.

The agreement, which expires at the end of next year, is a joint undertaking between the Commonwealth, states and territories on objectives and targets to lift education outcomes, and is supported by bilateral funding agreements. Negotiations between federal Education Minister Jason Clare and his state and territory counterparts on the next agreement are due to start in November.

The report calls for a change in the way academic achievement is measured after a decade of stalled literacy and numeracy performance in national and international tests.

“We need to track academic outcomes over time rather than at [a] single point, and we need greater transparency and accountability for this,” Siegel-Brown said.

However, The Productivity Commission did not consider the adequacy of federal-state school funding arrangements as part of its review.

Terms of Reference

Such Reports reflect in fact, their **Terms of Reference**. This means that, although interesting findings may be made, there is rarely any overall assessment of the real situation or the causes and effects of shortcomings in educational performance in Australia. Different commentators latch on to different aspects of such reports and use them to push their own agendas. And the downward trend continues.

There have been a number of comments on this Productivity Commission Report.

1. The Federal Minister for Education said: the report's "important" findings aligned with his view of the teacher workforce challenges and equity issues facing the schooling sector.

"It says we have a teacher shortage crisis and that a big part of that is workload. The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan that education ministers will finalise in December will focus on this and other measures to attract, prepare and retain teachers," he said.

The report found teacher effectiveness is the most influential in-school factor that has an impact on student outcomes, and that teachers are overly burdened with low-value tasks.

2. Education researcher at the Centre for Independent Studies, Glenn Fahey, said that, despite real per student funding increasing by 21 per cent over the past decade, student achievement has either fallen backwards or improved only marginally.

Australian students recorded their worst results in 2018's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), failing to exceed the OECD average in maths and dropping in global rankings in reading and science. NAPLAN results in numeracy have improved slightly over the decade but have gone backwards in other areas, such as high school writing.

"We have seen increased funding and resources over two decades at the same time student outcomes are significantly behind where they were in early 2000s."

Fahey argues that the measurement of educational outcomes is too shallow and that clearer assessment of children is needed before they start school as well as a national measure to give a better picture of how students are performing on finishing year 12.

“ATAR has flaws in that it doesn’t provide a national barometer of school leavers’ capabilities. We don’t have a clear school readiness starting point which would help so we can intervene earlier.

3. SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

One of the most interesting reaction is that of Trevor Cobbolds from Save our Schools. He and Pasi Sahlberg had made a submission to the Productivity Commission at <https://saveourschools.com.au/equity-in-education/submission-to-the-productivity-commission-inquiry-on-the-national-school-reform-agreement/> in which their argued that the concept of equity in Education should be clearly defined, measured and reported.

The following, which draws upon their submission, is their reaction to its findings:

Equity in Education Must be Clearly Defined, Measured and Reported

 [Trevor Cobbold](#) / [July 6, 2022](#) / [Equity in education](#)

Equity in education has long been a key national goal for schooling. Most recently, it is one of the key goals in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration of national goals. However, it has never been clearly defined. This deficiency has resulted in a variety of interpretations, inadequate target, limited reporting and lack of accountability for improving equity. Equity in education should be well-defined in order to effectively guide education policy and funding, measure equity and monitor progress in improving equity.

The Productivity Commission inquiry on the [National Schooling Reform Agreement \(NSRA\)](#) offers an opportunity to correct this longstanding deficiency. [The Commission has been tasked](#) to assess the effectiveness of the policy initiatives of the current NSRA and the appropriateness of the measurement framework in measuring progress towards achieving the outcomes of the NSRA. It is also asked to make recommendations to inform the next reform agreement between the Commonwealth and state governments and to improve the [National Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia](#).

The current NSRA sets out a range of national and state policy initiatives to achieve agreed objectives, outcomes and targets. The objective of the Agreement is that Australian schooling provides a high quality and equitable education for all students. The Agreement state:

“Parties recognise the critical importance of supporting and facilitating the achievement of priority equity cohorts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with a disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.”

However, what constitutes an equitable education is nowhere defined in the Agreement. This must change if the next Agreement is to provide any real guide to improving equity in education. Continued absence of a clear definition enables governments to avoid accountability about improving equity.

The goal of equity in education should have regard to both the minimum levels of achievement expected for all students and the comparative education outcomes of students from different social groups.

First, from an individual perspective, equity in education outcomes should mean that all children receive an education that enables them to fully participate in adult society in a way of their choosing. We can refer to this as an *adequate* education. Second, equity in education also means that students from different social groups should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of these outcomes. We can call this *social equity* in education. This definition and the case for it is detailed in a paper by Pasi Sahlberg and Trevor Cobbold published in the [*Journal School Leadership and Management*](#).

The first principle of equitable education is that all children receive at least a minimum level of education that gives them the capacity to function as independent adults and to participate effectively in society. It means that all children have the right to high quality education that equips them with the knowledge, understandings, and skills to create their own meaning in the world, to choose their own path in society as adults and to take an active part in shaping the development of society. This is a matter of justice for all individuals. In today's society, this requires all children to complete Year 12 or its equivalent.

In failing to ensure an adequate education for all, society incurs lost opportunities for its own advancement and human development that, in turn, is often associated with growing inequalities in societies. These include higher youth unemployment, lower earnings, lower productivity and economic growth, higher health care and crime costs, lower tax revenues and higher welfare expenditure.

It is not reasonable or realistic to expect that education policy should aim to ensure that all children achieve the same education outcomes because, as individuals, they have a range of abilities and talents which lead to different choices in schooling. However, it is reasonable to expect that these different abilities and talents are distributed similarly across different social, ethnic and gender groups in society. We should expect that female students as a group achieve similar average and range of outcomes as male students. The same expectation should apply to other social groups: Indigenous and non-Indigenous; low and high SES; rural, remote, and metropolitan. The goal should be to close the gaps in educational attainment measures between such groups.

A further issue is that broad social groups that are historically discriminated against in education comprise sub-groups where there are also large differences in achievement. For example, large achievement gaps exist between immigrant students from East Asia and those from the Middle East, Africa, and the South Pacific. There are also large differences in school results between Indigenous students in remote and urban areas.

Large disparities in education outcomes mean that the social group individuals are born into strongly affects their life opportunities. Large disparities in school outcomes according to different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence, and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

A dual goal of equity in education is eminently justifiable. It guarantees a threshold level of education for everyone and a fair or equitable distribution of the benefits of education for all social groups. It should be a key national goal of schooling.

This definition of equity also provides provide the framework for policy making and a clear measurable approach to assessing progress towards achieving equity in education. It sets

targets to be achieved – what proportion of students complete Year 12 or its equivalent and what are the achievement gaps between advantaged and various cohorts of disadvantaged students.

However, the targets set in the current NSRA are deficient. While several equity groups are nominated in the Agreement, targets are set only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait students. No education targets are set for educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, or for disability students. The next Agreement should set clear achievement targets for a range of equity groups.

Reporting on progress in improving equity is also deficient. The [annual reports](#) on the implementation of the NSRA and the [progress reports by state and territory governments](#) refer only to the implementation of the policy initiatives. They do not provide any data on progress towards the outcomes targeted by the Agreement. Nor do they include any data on progress on achievement by equity groups identified in the Measurement Framework.

These reports should include data to enable an assessment of the success of the national policy initiatives in meeting the objectives of the Agreement. In addition, the reports should provide sufficient data to assess progress in improving equity in education.

There are several data sources to draw upon in reporting on the target outcomes. For example, the Australian, Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority reports on [NAPLAN results](#) by sex, Indigenous status and location, Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE), parent education and occupation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports retention rates to Years 9, 10, 11 and 12 by sex and Indigenous background in [Schools](#) and the [Report on Government Services](#) reports Year 12 attainment rates by socio-economic status and location.

However, there are significant gaps in reporting on outcomes by equity group at the end of schooling. Year 12 outcomes are the ultimate measure of the success of schooling. Data collections need to be upgraded to adequately assess the effectiveness of policy initiatives and progress in improving equity in education.

A clear definition of equity in education is fundamental to making real progress towards it. Not only would it clarify expectations about equity but it is necessary to set clear achievement targets for students from different social groups and monitor progress in achieving equity. It is equally necessary to ensure government accountability for making progress on equity.

This article was originally published on John Menaduu's [Pearls and Irritations](#) blog.

DOGS POSITION:

The concept of ‘equity’ and ‘Needs’ introduced into the education debate by the Whitlam government in 1973, has been used and abused many times over by the private sector as they have ‘gamed the system’. Reports such as the most recent Productivity Report cannot solve any problems because they are prevented, from the very terms of reference, from confronting the real funding and equity problems caused by State Aid to the private religious, self interested sector.

DOGS suggest that, instead of trying to define the concept itself, public education advocates take the high ground. Public schools, by their very nature, are open to all children and treat them equally.

Equity in education commences with Equal schools.

The only schools which can possibly embrace concept of genuine equity are those which are public schools i.e.

Schools which are

Public in purpose

Public in outcome

Above all public in access

Public in ownership

Public in control

Publicly accountable.

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