

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 973

Productivity Report on National School Reform Agreement : The Art of Avoiding Real Issues

The Productivity Commission appears, on the surface to be an independent body writing reports and making recommendation to the Government of the day. But how independent is it? And what is left out of its Reports?

The personnel of the Commission is under question after appointments made by the Coalition Government. But the quality of its Reports is another burning issue.

Reports, particularly those dealing with Education are noted, not so much for what they deal with but with what they are not permitted to deal with.

For example, the current Productivity Commission's terms of reference for the Report on the National School Reform Agreement of 2018 did not include funding. According to the Commission:

This report was released on 20 January 2023. It examines how well national policy initiatives by the Australian, State and Territory Governments have achieved the objectives and outcomes set out in the Agreement and makes recommendations to inform the design of the next school reform agreement.

The review recommends redesigning the agreement to focus more attention on lifting academic results for all students, supporting quality teaching and school leadership, and promoting students' wellbeing.

Download the overview

- [Overview - Review of the National School Reform Agreement - Study report \(PDF - 828 Kb\)](#)
- [Overview - Review of the National School Reform Agreement - Study report \(Word - 2795 Kb\)](#)

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- [Review of the National School Reform Agreement - Study report \(PDF - 3384 Kb\)](#)
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What is this review about?

Four years ago, on the back of a \$319 billion funding deal,¹ and amid concerns that Australia's performance in international testing had fallen, the Commonwealth, States and Territories struck an agreement on national reforms to lift education outcomes — the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

The objective of the NSRA is for Australian schools to provide a high quality and equitable education for all students. This continues a longstanding commitment by Education Ministers to equity and excellence in schooling. While equity and quality are not defined in the NSRA, these concepts are embodied in the NSRA's outcomes, targets and national performance measures (sub-outcomes).

To lift outcomes in student achievement, attainment and engagement, the NSRA outlines three reform directions, supported by eight National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) and bilateral agreements between the Commonwealth and each State and Territory government (figure 1). Implementing the reform initiatives is a condition of Commonwealth funding.

The Australian Government has asked the Commission to:

- assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the NPIs under the NSRA, recognising that reforms take time to implement and mature
- assess the appropriateness of the Measurement Framework for Schooling in measuring progress towards achieving the outcomes of the NSRA
- make recommendations to inform the design of the next school reform agreement and to improve the National Measurement Framework.²

Funding is outside the scope of the Commission's Review.

The Commission found, amongst other things that:

1. Since 2013, there have been marginal improvements in reading test results in year 3 and year 5, but no improvements in year 7 and year 9. Test results for numeracy have stagnated across all year levels since 2013. Commission analysis tracking the same cohort from year 3 to year 9 shows that the improvements in year 3 and year 5 reading do not persist to year 7 and year 9.
2. Since 2013, there have been marginal improvements in reading test results in year 3 and year 5, but no improvements in year 7 and year 9. Test results for numeracy have stagnated across all year levels since 2013.
3. Commission analysis tracking the same cohort from year 3 to year 9 shows that the improvements in year 3 and year 5 reading do not persist to year 7 and year 9.

¹ As part of its Quality Schools package, the Australian Government committed to increasing funding for schools from \$18.7 billion in 2018 to \$33 billion in 2029, bringing funding to an estimated \$318.9 billion over 2018 to 2029.

² The Measurement Framework for Schooling underpins the National Report on Schooling in Australia.

4. There are long-standing differences in national test results for reading and numeracy across students from different backgrounds, or who have different experiences or needs.

Results for reading and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in outer regional and remote areas, and students with parents with low educational attainment are consistently below the outcomes of the general student population.

DOGS note that these Findings indicate that the Coalition's 2018 \$319 b funding deal made between the Federal Government and the Education providers in Australia, public and private, is failing – dismally. If the woes befalling the teaching profession are added to the failure of the testing procedures imposed upon the schools something is wrong – very wrong in the education of our Australian children. If the Productivity Commission had been permitted to examine the funding inequalities in Australian Education, its members might have presented more realistic recommendations.

However, an interesting little detail is buried in the Productivity Commission Report - funding for public schools (2/3rds of students) has risen 18%, Catholic 34% and private 47% since 2013.

DOGS suggest that the Productivity Commission personnel, its terms of reference, and the funding of private schools requires examination. The personnel should be changed; the terms of reference include public and private funding; and funding to private schools should be abolished.

DOGS are not alone in questioning the Productivity Commission and its peculiar biases. An article in 'Inside Story' by John Quiggin, a Professor of economics at the University of Queensland, at <https://insidestory.org.au/neoliberalisms-child/>

is entitled *NeoLiberalism's Child: the Latest Productivity Commission report marks the end of an era*. He argues that

The trajectory of the Productivity Commission is a microcosm of the history of neoliberalism (often described in Australia as “economic rationalism” and “microeconomic reform”). During the fifty years since the early 1970s, neoliberalism has gone from being an economic policy revolution (or counter-revolution) to being a dominant ideology, before finally fading to near irrelevance.

While the ACTU issued a Press Release on 20 March 2023 saying:

Productivity Commission is the problem, not working people

Today's five-yearly report from the Productivity Commission, with its 71 recommendations, reveals yet again how outdated and irrelevant it is. While a review of the Commission has been floated, the only real solution is to scrap it.

The Productivity Commission is stacked with former staffers to Liberal politicians, and together they reflexively reach to reduce the rights of working people. This lack of balance and diversity is reflected in today's regressive recommendations.

One of its notions is to encourage schools to 'innovate' by outsourcing teaching jobs to online teachers should the school lack specialist expertise, making a mockery of addressing the current teacher shortage crisis. It also wants to slug apprentices and university students with increased fees.

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