



Submission to:

**The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence
in Australian Schools**

(Text lodged via Review online submission form)

November 2017

Introduction

The Community Council for Australia (CCA) welcomes this opportunity to provide input into this Inquiry and is keen to engage in detailed discussion about any proposals arising from the Inquiry.

CCA is particularly interested in the terms of reference relating to parent and community engagement; and, identifying, sharing and driving good practice to address the complex range of factors that influence educational engagement and outcomes – inside and outside of the school gate. We welcome the focus beyond a school certificate toward preparedness of school leavers to succeed in employment, further training or higher education.

CCA has consulted with members in framing this submission, however, it is important to note that this submission does not override the policy positions outlined in any individual submissions from CCA members.

The Community Council for Australia

The Community Council for Australia is an independent non-political member based organisation dedicated to building flourishing communities by enhancing the extraordinary work undertaken by the charities and not-for-profit sector in Australia. CCA seeks to change the way governments, communities and not-for-profits relate to one another. It does so by providing a national voice and facilitation for sector leaders to act on common and shared issues affecting the contribution, performance and viability of NFPs in Australia. View CCA's membership at: <http://www.communitycouncil.com.au/cca-members>

Background context: the not-for-profit sector

The NFP sector encompasses over 600,000 organisations - from large to very small, and employs over 1,000,000 staff (around 10% of all employees in Australia). Australia's 54,000 charities collectively turn over more than \$130 billion each year and hold over \$260 billion in assets.

These facts tell only a small part of the story. The real value of the NFP sector is often in the unmeasured contribution to Australian quality of life. NFPs are at the heart of our communities; building connection, nurturing spiritual and cultural expression, and enhancing the productivity of all Australians. Collectively, they make us a more resilient society. Education is the biggest area of NFP sector activity.

Charities and not-for-profits generally have a very strong relationship with the communities they serve and are therefore ideally placed to be part of new measures to strengthen and improve the education systems currently operating across Australian communities.

Background context: Education is everyone's business

In 2015, CCA brought together charity leaders to define the Australia We Want – a vision for the society we should aspire to. Agreeing the priority values was relatively straight-forward. We all wanted to live in a just, fair, safe, equal opportunity, inclusive, united, authentic, creative, confident, courageous, optimistic, generous, kind, compassionate Australia.

Agreeing how we would know these values were being implemented – the indicators – was more challenging.

There was one area that all agreed had to be a priority indicator – access to quality education. Education changes lives, reduces inter-generational inequality and creates opportunity. Recently, the World Bank pointed to education as central to achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

From a national perspective, higher levels of educational attainment is associated with:

- greater economic productivity;
- increased workforce participation;
- higher tax payments;
- reduced reliance on welfare, health and social support programs; and
- higher levels of civic engagement and social cohesion.

At an individual level, higher educational attainment is associated with increased income, better general health, lower reliance on welfare, and less engagement in crime.

If we want stronger communities, a more prosperous, productive and happier Australia, we need to provide quality inclusive education for all.

A complex, inter-related range of factors influence educational attainment. These include: individual characteristics, family characteristics, peers, the communities students live in, the way schools and other institutions operate.

Learning and educational engagement does not begin and end at the school gate. If we are to improve educational outcomes for all students, we need to better understand what works for whom and in what circumstances. Evidence must drive practice within an education system that embeds a holistic approach to student needs and individual circumstances. Inherently, this means engaging and partnering with students themselves, their families and communities. Funding, performance and accountability structures must support this approach.

Charities and not for profits are partners for change. Grounded in community, they are facilitators, bridge-builders and advocates who work with educators, students, families, communities, business, philanthropy, academia and governments to achieve better outcomes for individual students and our communities. Policy settings should value and better support charities as partners.

Charities are frustrated that our fragmented education system creates barriers instead of pathways to achieving a better return on investment, innovation and improvement. They are frustrated that successful initiatives are not easily built upon, scaled or systematised; that wheels are continually re-invented; that funding policy drives competition instead of collaboration; that contract management burns resources instead of applying them for maximum impact; and that change-making leadership too often comes down to courageous individuals bucking the system, instead of being supported by it.

This submission is solutions focused and is informed by CCA membership and CCA work to realise the Australia We Want. This included a leadership forum in August 2017 that brought together charity and educational leaders to focus on priority actions to improve educational attainment for young people currently disengaged or disadvantaged in education.

Key issues relating to achieving educational excellence in Australian schools

1. A future-focused vision that has a long-term non-partisan commitment to action

Education needs a sustained vision and commitment that rises above partisan politics and political cycles and adopts a long-term, strategic view. This includes priorities to address the educational disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, children from low socio-economic areas; and those living in rural and remote Australia. We must have a clear articulation of the outcomes we want to equip our young people for the future, and nation-wide shared commitment to working towards those goals, with transparency and accountability.

The Foundation for Young Australians' New Work Order series (based on analysis of 20 billion hours of work activity) shows we need to create self-directed learners able to access a wealth of information; who are good communicators and collaborators.

Our education system should focus on skills and capabilities. The Productivity Commission's *Shifting the Dial: 5 Year Productivity Review, Inquiry Report (2017)* says that in terms of education and future skills and work, 'if we had to pick just one thing to improve... it must be skills formation'. It goes on to say that the key foundational skills of numeracy, literacy and analytical skills need to be complemented with 'soft' skills such as teamwork, collaboration, leadership and creativity. These capabilities, along with proficiency in interacting with digital technology, are essential to adaptability and retention of employment.

Our education system needs to get better at nurturing creativity, communication, collaboration and resilience, and delivering confident life-long learners with a strong grounding in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).

Our system is built for the mainstream, but our students have individual needs, talents and circumstances. We need to create opportunities for each student to realise their potential, reduce our focus on competitive grading, and use evaluations that better recognise the application of skills and capabilities. There is merit in the Productivity Commission's focus on proficiency over competency and alternative approaches to assessment, including individual assessments.

We need measures of success that include engagement in learning, the lived experience of education and whether or not our school leavers go on to succeed in employment, further training or higher education.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, agreed by all Australian education ministers in December 2008 articulated a vision and goals. This commitment to take a long term strategic view supported by all governments should be reinvigorated and built upon.

Recommendation 1

Underpin education policy and delivery at every level with a future-focused vision for the educational outcomes we seek and a long-term non-partisan commitment to action:

- a. Revisit, recommit, reinvigorate the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2008**
- b. Refocus education on skills and capabilities, less on content to ensure young people are able to adapt, learn and flourish in a fast-evolving future.**

2. Students are falling through cracks and there is an evidence gap. We do not have a clear picture of what works, and for whom

The learning experience and journey of every young Australian matters.

There is an evidence gap and we do not have a clear picture of each student's learning journey, outcomes and 'where they land'. The Productivity Review Inquiry Report, 2017 recognises that 'failure to act early has consequences for people's job and lifetime outcomes that may only emerge years later, but are at that point largely irreversible'. Every young person is entitled to the right support, at the right time, in the right way to complete their education and transition to meaningful employment and life opportunities.

This is particularly important for our most vulnerable students many of whom change schools on multiple occasions and move between jurisdictions. A unique student identifier would facilitate smoother transition in to a new school setting with less impact on learning progression.

Understanding young people's pathways through education will also better position us to assess 'what works, and for whom', and hence inform educational investments.

It will also help us ensure there are effective learning options for young people to complete Year 12 or equivalent, including improving transition for those who might benefit from non-traditional schooling such as community not for profit colleges.

A Unique Student Identifier was agreed to by the Australian Education Ministers in 2008 but not implemented. The Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base (2016) recommended the development and implementation of a nationally consistent system of unique student identifiers.

Recommendation 2

Implement a Unique Student Identifier for every student across education systems and jurisdiction

3. We must act on parental engagement

Research over the past forty years highlights the critical role of parental engagement in their children's learning. This is particularly true for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socioeconomic background. Parent's aspirations and expectations have consistently been identified as the strongest and most influential aspect of parental engagement. Students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education.

Our education system must engage with parents, and support them to be engaged. This includes consideration of the importance and accessibility of adult learning opportunities to address low levels of adult literacy and numeracy, and English as a second language. Community Hubs and Schools as Community Centres (in NSW) are examples of initiatives that bring CALD and other families into the school community to increase their participation.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is developing and validating a measure for parental engagement, in partnership with the Australian Council for Educational Research.

The results from the voluntary implementation of this measure should be reviewed by Australian Education Ministers with a view to embedding it in school reporting.

Recommendation 3

Implement a parental engagement measure to better monitor and improve parental engagement as an educational priority.

4. Educational leadership that looks within and beyond the school walls

Quality teaching is recognised as the in-school factor that most influences student outcomes.

School leadership and school culture play a critical role in supporting and retaining quality teachers and supporting a positive learning environment. Leadership is also essential in building and enabling the parent, family and community relationships that facilitate informal and formal partnerships to improve educational outcomes.

We need to support, empower and develop quality teachers and educational leaders. Recommendation 3.1 of the Productivity Commission Productivity Review 2017 should be implemented.

Recommendation 4

Implement Recommendation 3.1, Improve Educational Outcomes of Australian Students, of the Productivity Commission, *Shifting the Dial: 5 Year Productivity Review, Inquiry Report (2017)*

5. A quality-improving system that leverages partnerships and evidence

The Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base (2016) and the Productivity Review (2017) reinforce the need to share data, and to build and use an evidence base to focus on improvements.

This applies to educator-focused initiatives and support programs.

There are many programs funded by governments and by schools themselves to improve educational outcomes by working with students, families, carers and communities. Yet there is no ready access to know about their existence, their outcomes or their learning.

There are real gains to be made by sharing of data and learning, and by ensuring that the policy goal of all programs and interventions are clarified, measured and reported against.

There are also gains to be made by improving the way government funds and manages contracts with not for profit providers.

Inputs and Outputs, or Outcomes and Impact?

If we are to realise better outcomes from our investment in education and support programs, we need to clarify policy goals and link them to meaningful outcome measurement. The fundamental question - *what is the policy goal of this program?* – should be followed by - *what informs these goals and how are they measured?*

The usual response to questions about policy goals in program and service delivery are descriptions of inputs and outputs – how many people receive services and at what cost? Only rarely is there any real discussion about what was achieved in terms of outcomes. There is even less discussion about longer term impact.

A lack of clarity about policy goals and measures results in a failure to understand how best to deliver the desired outcomes. As a consequence, we seem to be awash with ad hoc measures being developed by government departments and by the providers of programs and services. These often default to input and output measures that rarely inform policy goals or describe the outcomes achieved.

For instance, a government may have a policy goal of increasing Indigenous junior school attendance and retention. Senior government officials might develop and implement a program to pay for additional social workers to visit the homes of students absent from school and encourage them to attend or to talk to parents.

What gets measured and reported in these programs tend to be activities measures - how many social workers are deployed and how many hours of home visits are conducted.

In practice, improving attendance at school is a complex issue driven by many local factors. There have been successful initiatives such as providing a four-wheel drive bus to enable junior football teams to travel between remote communities to become part of a regular fixture of inter-community football matches. Only kids who attended school could be selected in the team. Without the bus it would take many vehicles and adults for the competition to work. Experience tells us that in some communities, this kind of active engagement initiative has increased school attendance by over 30%. Successful investments to increase Indigenous school attendance include; building a swimming pool, setting up a music recording and video production studio, and supporting a mentoring program. What might work in any particular community clearly needs to be informed by those who live and work in the community.

As this example highlights, achieving real change for people is not always about directly intervening in one area of their lives, independent of others.

How do we know what works? It starts by setting clear policy goals, talking with clients, organisations and communities to establish meaningful goals, and then measuring success or failure against the agreed outcomes.

Recommendation 5

Clarify policy goals of all programs and activity, and invest in outcomes measurement and evaluation.

- All government contracts seeking to achieve a social purpose should have at least a 5% allocation to support the collection and reporting of appropriate performance measures.

Recommendation 6

Improve access to data and data sharing to build on success, learn from failure, inform improvement and translate best practice into common practice. This includes the establishment of a national, independent evidence broker.

Recommendation 7

Ensure accountability measures at all levels within the system drive and support evidence-based practice that responds to students as individuals, with a holistic view of their needs and circumstances.

Recommendation 8

Use to transparency to drive performance

- Transparent performance reporting will drive real improvements in performance, but not unless governments commit to collecting and making public a much higher level of outcome and impact reporting, not just of the not-for-profits they contract, but of their own performance in achieving government policy goals.

Work Better with Partners

Government funding and contract management processes are too often focused on process and compliance, rather than open supportive relationships focused on performance and impact. Competitive tendering fosters competition where there should be collaboration. Short funding cycles create uncertainty and undermine sustainability. There is a lack of dedicated investment within contracts for capacity building and evaluation that would build upon success and share learning in a quality improving system.

Recommendation 9

Move from compliance to a partnership approach in program design and implementation that takes the long-view and is focused on impact and quality improvement

Areas for reform include:

- *promoting co-design* (with program users, their communities and providers of services)
- *collaboration and collective impact* (drawing on the combined strengths of different organisations in flexible funding arrangements to support community driven goals)
- *less micro-management and compliance* (giving organisations a greater opportunity to both succeed and fail)
- *greater emphasis on achieving outcomes* (better focus on exactly what the program is meant to be delivering in terms of outcomes and impact)
- *more time to develop and sustain programs* (short-term funding is often consumed establishing capacity which is then undermined by future uncertainty)
- *building on what works* (knowing what has been tried and what works is critical to improvement)
- *recognising the value of relationships* (often the real capacity of an organisation lies in the relationships with clients, families, communities and other service providers)
- *place based solutions* (working with communities to develop local solutions that may be adapted from the experiences of other communities).

Conclusion

The Community Council for Australia (CCA) welcomes this opportunity to provide input into this Inquiry and is keen to engage in detailed discussion about any proposals arising from the Inquiry.

Improving what we do in education sits at the heart of realising better futures for our young people, our communities and our nation. We need to shift the way we provide educational opportunities and learning to ensure we are responding to the needs and circumstances of each individual child. We should be creating life-long learners, well-prepared to adapt and flourish in a fast-evolving world. 'Student centred learning' needs to be much more than a popular buzzword, and it needs to be expanded to recognise the need for increased parent and community engagement.

The starting point for reform is a strong, clear, agreed long-term vision and commitment across jurisdictions to guide all that we do. This must be supported by measures, accountability frameworks and transparency to focus our efforts and inform improvement. Until we become better at sharing data, building and using evidence, we will continue to perpetuate growing irrelevancy and run the risk of rewarding failure.

Schools and other educational institutions should never be islands, located in the heart of communities, but isolated and disconnected. Our educators and our school system need to work in partnership with families, carers and communities to address in-school and out-of-school factors that influence access to education, engagement, attainment and transition to meaningful post-school pathways.

To improve educational achievement, we need reform that recognises, embraces, facilitates and supports the role that families, carers, communities, business, charities and not-for-profit partners play in realising better outcomes for our young people. The not-for-profit sector want to be part of this reform, part of ensuring we live in flourishing communities where education opportunities are genuinely available to all.