



**Response to Call for submissions -  
Review of the National School Reform Agreement**

12 July 2022

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Call for Submissions – Review of the National School Reform Agreement. As the peak body representing state and territory joint councils of teacher associations, and with a network of up to 200,000 teachers from across the various sectors, the Australian Professional Teachers Association is in a key position to provide comment.

Our strength as an organisation lies in our ability to directly represent the interests of practicing classroom teachers across Australia. We are a voice for teachers and an effective conduit between decision-making bodies and the classroom. APTA provides an alternative to principal committees or teacher unions, with a classroom-focused, practitioner perspective that is directly connected to the student, rather than a managerial perspective of school operations. APTA is thus well positioned to provide an informed view from a teacher perspective on whether areas of policy warrant national consideration, or whether some issues are better addressed at a jurisdictional level or via other means.

I am able to provide further detail to the comments in this response if this will be of assistance.

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## **Response to Call for submissions - Review of the National School Reform Agreement**

The response from APTA will focus on the connection between what happens in the classroom and national policy under six key areas:

1. What should policymakers understand about classroom practice when designing or evaluating government policy?
2. What role do teachers and school leaders play in translating policy reforms or initiatives into practice? Are there any barriers that might prevent that from happening?
3. How are teachers and school leaders consulted on new policy development?
4. Views on potential areas of future national policy reform.
5. The appropriateness of the NSRA's objectives/outcomes and the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia.
6. Progress on the current suite of national policy initiatives, including any unforeseen issues or barriers to implementation.

### **1. What should policymakers understand about classroom practice when designing or evaluating government policy?**

- In planning their day-to-day lessons, teachers move seamlessly between curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and research - these are not distinct components as suggested by the national architecture for schooling.
- In relation to classroom practice, teachers are very busy and are working very long hours, impacting on their wellbeing. Teachers have many competing demands for their time. Teachers have to prioritise - often what is going to be checked for compliance, not what will improve student learning outcomes. They are not able to do everything well.
- Teachers want to focus on classroom teaching and lesson planning - but administration and compliance tasks often get in the way.
- A lot more time today is spent on student wellbeing issues than even five years ago. There are increased mental health challenges of students post-COVID lockdown, manifesting in poor social skills, behaviour management issues, disengagement from learning and school refusal.
- COVID-19 is continuing to impact on teaching – schools are short-staffed, and teachers are required to cover other classes with no notice. Teachers have difficulty in focusing on strategic planning, long-term objectives and contributing to collaborative projects with colleagues.
- Many parents/students currently see themselves as “customers” who can demand things of the teacher (e.g. hour-long consultations to justify student marks and feedback) - but no extra time is allocated for the teacher to provide this personalised level of service to every student.
- Many teachers are working outside of their subject/specialty. This is common for beginning teachers and teachers in regional/remote areas and makes it difficult for teachers to teach well in the classroom when they are trying to master content AND pedagogy at the same time.

- Generalist pedagogy has been promoted in the last ten years at the expense of specialist pedagogy (the focus of subject-specific teacher associations), impacting on student learning outcomes and PISA results.
- Teacher work is very diverse - from teaching maths, to doing playground duty, to running sport, to helping students 1:1 with life problems. Contexts across schools can differ greatly, e.g. elite private schools to public schools in low socio-economic areas.
- A lot of people think they are experts at teaching because they went to school themselves. The context of teaching has changed very much over the last five years.
- APTA recommends that government policy appreciate that the complexity of teacher's work has increased in the last five years. For these reasons, all communication and requests for advice should be concise and provide adequate time for considered responses to be developed by the 'time poor' teachers.

## **2. What role do teachers and school leaders play in translating policy reforms or initiatives into practice? Are there any barriers that might prevent that from happening?**

- There is a big gap between education policy and its implementation in the classroom.
- The role of school leaders should be to clearly communicate policy reforms that are most relevant to teachers' work, in plain language, to teachers within their schools so that teachers understand the purpose of the policy reform and what it means for their classroom practice.
- Teachers and school leaders should be easily able to access information on government reforms or initiatives that are relevant to their profession.
- The role of school leaders should be to facilitate teachers' understanding of the 'big picture' of what the policy means for day-to-day operations in their classrooms to increase implementation efficacy of proposed changes.
- Teachers currently seem disconnected from federal government education policy reform, with what little time they have often given first to understanding state initiatives.
- Barriers that might be preventing teachers from being engaged with policy reform and initiatives are:
  - Difficulty accessing information from multiple government websites. Teachers seamlessly work between curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and research. The national architecture for education is confusing. It takes time to master the systems of the national architecture.
  - Difficulty seeing the connection between policy and immediate classroom practice. Many initiatives are announced and come and go with no need to engage with them. In a time-poor environment, teachers are narrowly focused on their classroom and surviving the next week rather than thinking about the next year or more.
  - Feeling disempowered from the decision-making process. Over the last ten years, classroom teachers have come to see that teacher voice is not valued

in decision making (dominated by bureaucrats at state and federal level, almost all of whom do not have teaching experience in the last three years). When teacher voice is included, it is usually limited in number, includes individuals who may not have a broad understanding of the cross-sectoral environment in which they operate, or is included after the point at which any significant change can be made to decisions that have already been finalised.

- Sense of cynicism - teachers feel that the education bureaucracy “loves to reinvent itself”. Being disengaged from this process just saves a lot of time and energy in the long run for teachers.
  - There is a lack of recognition for the small number of teachers who are involved in policy reform. Being involved in policy development is often perceived as a distraction from activities that lead to career advancement.
  - There is no release time from schools for teachers to be involved in policy reforms or initiatives. The role of school leaders should be to provide time for teachers, through well-structured professional learning opportunities in and outside of school settings, to consider policy documents and provide timely feedback as professionals.
- APTA recommends that government policy actively include authentic teacher voice as a means of empowering the profession and of producing more effective government policy that has direct classroom impact.

### **3. How are teachers and school leaders consulted on new policy development?**

There is a difference in how teachers and school leaders are consulted on new policy development. Principals are regularly consulted through principals’ associations. Principals’ associations are able to speak from a managerial perspective of school operations. Teachers are sometimes consulted through teachers’ associations such as APTA. Teachers’ associations are able to speak from a classroom-focused, practitioner perspective that is directly connected to the student. Both perspectives are important in consultation on new policy development. Some policy makers make the mistake of thinking that by talking to principal associations alone, they are consulting with teachers.

Often working groups are made up of representatives of each state or territory education authority. Individual expert teachers may be included in these working groups, but often the individual teachers selected do not have a broad understanding of cross-sectoral issues and contexts and/or the broader national policy environment and only have an understanding of their specific context. Most importantly, these individual teacher representatives do not have a representational role to speak on behalf of other teachers. All they are doing is providing a personal opinion as an individual professional. When teacher associations are invited to any policy consultative event or process, they are beholden to know what their members think on matters presented and speak on behalf of a significant cross-section of teachers.

APTA has made some inroads on contributing to new policy development in recent years. An example of the potential of APTA to be proactive and representative is the role APTA had in broadly consulting when making submissions to the Alice Springs Declaration on Education Goals and the National Initiatives to Support Teaching and School Leadership. APTA recommends the representation of professional teacher association leaders on expert advisory committees within the national architecture for schooling because these leaders are respected, experienced, expert teachers across schooling sectors with proven pedagogy and a strong understanding of how to lead curriculum development, implementation, assessment and review.

If the Productivity Commission wants to improve the productivity of the education sector, it is important to develop high-performing professional teachers. The key is to promote teacher voice in an authentic way; and not just the bureaucratic voice or the principal voice. The classroom teacher voice is best represented by teacher associations that consult with and speak on behalf of thousands of teachers across Australia.

APTA recommends that teacher association voice, as well as principal association voice, be considered in formulating education policy to ensure relevance to classroom practice.

#### **4. Views on potential areas of future national policy reform**

The emergency issue for education policy at the moment is how to prevent many excellent classroom teachers from leaving the profession due to excessive workloads and not feeling valued. COVID-19 has exacerbated these issues.

National policy reform needs to centre around teacher workforce needs. By looking after the needs of teachers, teachers will be able to look after the needs of students in their care. Listening to teacher voice is a big part of the solution.

National policy reform in relation to teacher workforce needs must focus on the retention and wellbeing of the teaching force. Beside pay and conditions (much of which are state-based interventions), national policy reform must address:

- The reputation and professional status of teachers in the Australian community.
- The professional needs of teachers in terms of the provision of professional learning opportunities, accreditation of performance and recognition of the committed, motivated and excellent teachers across Australia.
- The quality of teacher education programs and practical and realistic courses to build teacher resilience – to maximise classroom readiness to reduce early career teacher resignations.
- Ways that teachers can be systematically consulted as professionals so that they can become the best educators they can be.

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and a strong understanding of how to lead curriculum development, implementation, assessment and review.

##### **5. The appropriateness of the NSRA's objectives/outcomes and the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia.**

- The Australian community should be asking the Education Ministers to report on: Are there enough skilled teachers for each classroom? Are classroom teachers supported with the subject-specific, specialist, continual professional learning they need to design and deliver appropriate and engaging lessons? Are teachers involved in decision making that impacts their profession?
- Shifting the narrative away from a deficit model and towards a solutions approach that recognises and supports the skills of teachers is important.
- APTA recommends that the NSRA objective and outcomes be reviewed in the light of the *Alice Springs Declaration on Education Goals* and the fact that the emergency issue at the moment is how to prevent many excellent classroom teachers from leaving the profession due to excessive workloads and not being valued.
- The 'Achievement' measures in the National Assessment Program (NAP) focus on literacy, numeracy, civics and citizenship, ICT literacy, and science literacy. Australia's emphasis on literacy and numeracy is not producing results. Encouraging schools to teach literacy and numeracy outside of their disciplinary contexts will not enable Australia to keep up with international standards. We are hearing from some primary schools that the ONLY teacher professional learning that will be approved by school leaders is in literacy and numeracy because those are the numbers on which the school is judged. This is an unintended consequence of, and is counterproductive to the aims of, the Agreement. People will try to succeed at what is measured, but they will also withdraw resources and focus from the things that are not measured.

##### **6. Progress on the current suite of national policy initiatives, including any unforeseen issues or barriers to implementation**

APTA would like to focus particular attention on National Policy Initiative B(i): Reviewing teacher workforce needs and the [National Initiatives to support Teaching and School Leadership](#).

APTA finds that there is nothing in the NSRA about increasing and improving Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers as a way of improving student outcomes. This is currently underfunded, particularly in the public systems. The constant emphasis on ITE, whenever teacher quality is raised, is based on the mistaken idea that a teacher should have all the knowledge and skill they need on the day they leave university. No other profession behaves in this way, and funded CPD should be an accepted requirement that enables teachers to move from competent to expert.

Teachers need to undertake professional learning each year in the subjects in which they are teaching. This would be the most powerful way to combat the out-of-field teaching

phenomenon and improve student outcomes. It is no surprise that our PISA results are declining when Australian education systems behave as if ‘a good teacher can teach anything’. The international systems that outperform Australia on PISA do not have this attitude and they value teacher content knowledge and content pedagogical knowledge. It seems that is the missing ingredient in Australia’s student learning outcomes.

APTA recommends subject/specialty professional learning that is customised to the professional needs of teachers, as determined by teachers and their associations, in order to build individual and collective capacity.

APTA recommends the provision of opportunities for teachers to develop their subject/speciality expertise through their professional teacher associations, supported and encouraged by educational jurisdictions in real terms, e.g. through accreditation and funding.

### **Summary of Recommendations:**

1. APTA recommends that government policy appreciate that the complexity of teacher’s work has increased in the last five years.
2. APTA recommends that government policy actively include authentic teacher voice as a means of empowering the profession and of producing more effective government policy that has direct classroom impact.
3. APTA recommends that teacher association voice, as well as principal association voice, be considered in formulating education policy to ensure relevance to classroom practice.
4. APTA recommends the representation of professional teacher association leaders on expert advisory committees within the national architecture for schooling because these leaders are respected, experienced, expert teachers across schooling sectors with proven pedagogy and a strong understanding of how to lead curriculum development, implementation, assessment and review.
5. APTA recommends that the NSRA objective and outcomes be reviewed in the light of the *Alice Springs Declaration on Education Goals* and the fact that the emergency issue at the moment is how to prevent many excellent classroom teachers from leaving the profession due to excessive workloads and not being valued.
6. APTA recommends subject/specialty professional learning that is customised to the professional needs of teachers, as determined by teachers and their associations, in order to build individual and collective capacity.

7. APTA recommends the provision of opportunities for teachers to develop their subject/speciality expertise through professional teacher associations, supported and encouraged by educational jurisdictions in real terms, e.g. through accreditation and funding.