



Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

APTA response to the Consultation Paper

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the issues raised in the Consultation Paper. The Australian Professional Teachers Association is a federation of state and territory joint councils representing teacher associations. These professional teaching associations represent a network of up to 200,000 teachers from government and non-government schools, early childhood services, universities, technical and further education centres. The vision of APTA is to provide national leadership that supports and advances the teaching profession. Our strengths as an organisation lie in our ability to directly represent the experiences of practicing classroom teachers across Australia, and in our long and continuous history of supporting teachers to improve the quality of education in Australia. We are a voice for teachers and an effective conduit between decision-making bodies and the classroom.

Contact:

Cheryl Brennan

President, Australian Professional Teachers Association

Website: www.apta.edu.au

Email: president@apta.edu.au

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APTA Response

The Ministerial Reference Group and the Expert Panel are undertaking a Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. A consultation paper was released on 5 July 2023 and the consultation period closes on 2 August 2023.

APTA acknowledges the complex and multi-layered factors that impact education experiences and outcomes. This response will address only the proposals, questions and concepts in the paper that touch on APTA's areas of responsibility and expertise.

This response from the Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) is about the crucial role that teacher knowledge, professional learning, networks and resource-sharing play in achieving Australia's goals of educational excellence and equity, and the ways in which the next NSRA could better support these.

<p><i>Education should support young Australians to become successful lifelong learners who have strong literacy and numeracy skills and deep knowledge of the world... p. 5</i></p> <p><i>The Panel considers that Australia's school systems should deliver strong literacy and numeracy skills and academic knowledge, alongside a broader range of student outcomes. p. 6</i></p> <p>APTA notes that the Review to date seems to have focused more strongly on universal and currently-measured education outcomes, such as literacy and numeracy, than on the development of students' knowledge of the world. This is a common phenomenon in state and national reviews which attempt to consider the student population or the teaching profession as a whole.</p> <p>In focusing primarily on things like literacy, numeracy and student wellbeing, these reviews neglect the importance of the disciplinary knowledge that provides students with an understanding of the world and a capacity to engage in it with confidence and agency. (Proficiency in these learning areas has also been shown to contribute to improved literacy and numeracy.) While the second Australian Professional Standard for Teachers is 'Know Your Subject and How to Teach It', there appears to be declining commitments from governments and Approved Authorities to supporting teachers to achieve this standard.</p> <p>Reviews frequently mention the importance of knowledge, but do not explore the relevant research or focus review questions on it, which risks missing out on the potential benefits that increased attention to it could offer with regard to educational excellence and equity.</p> <p>APTA's response to the consultation paper will focus primarily on the importance of disciplinary/subject knowledge and its links to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teacher workload - student outcomes - differentiated and targeted teaching - engagement with parents and carers - rural and regional education outcomes - impacts of out-of-field teaching - literacy and numeracy - teacher professional growth and development. 	<p>1.0</p> <p>1.1</p>
<p><i>Schools where students achieve regardless of their circumstance or background tend to have a number of features in common.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>They pursue an explicit improvement agenda – they know what they want to see improve and they know how they will monitor success.</i> 	<p>1.4</p>

- *The staff of the school work together as a team, supporting each other and sharing a clear focus on supporting quality teaching and learning in the school.*
- *Efforts are made to identify and understand the learning needs of students in the school and to use available human and physical resources to address those needs.*
- *The school builds relationships with parents and others outside the school in support of its improvement agenda.*

p. 10

The summary above is taken from a brochure encouraging schools to use the ACER-developed [National School Improvement Tool](#) which was endorsed by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood in 2012.

The developers of the Tool reviewed international research to identify the practices of highly effective schools and school leaders. These practices were then gathered under nine inter-related 'domains'.

Missing from the summary above is that one of the identified domains was the extent to which a school had 'an expert teaching team' and:

- *teachers in the school are experts in the fields in which they teach, have high levels of confidence in teaching in those fields and are eager to expand their subject knowledge to learn how to improve on their current teaching practices*
- *the school expects all teachers to be highly committed to the continuous improvement of their own teaching and to be focused on the development of knowledge and skills required to improve student learning*

Quality research continues to highlight the importance of teacher knowledge in the separate and distinct disciplines/subjects, yet the processes by which teachers are expected to gain and build on this knowledge are rarely defined or nurtured in major policy documents.

Professional teachers associations were formed by teachers to perform exactly this role and support members to become expert teachers *of their subject/discipline*. Teachers associations provide continuous state-wide networks and access to experienced, expert teachers and their resources. They are well positioned to support schools to improve in this domain. The extent to which schools will focus on improvement in this area will be influenced by its inclusion or omission in state and national review findings.

Targets and reforms in the next NSRA should be based on the best available evidence. This evidence needs to include a solid understanding of what works in

1.4

successful education systems and how to implement reforms effectively. Evidence-based initiatives should clearly demonstrate their impact on student outcomes, with accountability for effective delivery at both the system level (e.g. Approved Authority – see section 6.2) and the school level. Student outcomes should encompass the foundational knowledge and both generic and specific skills students are expected to develop each year to be able to engage in the curriculum... p. 11

The Panel considers that the next NSRA should contain reforms and targets which focus attention and investment on priority areas. The ambition needs to be clearly stated through firm targets and reform priorities. p. 11

APTA is pleased to see a focus on evidence-based practice in the consultation paper. For example, consideration of recent research into the impact of a knowledge-rich curriculum, particularly on the learning of students in lower socio-economic groups, would be welcome. However, there is a flaw in the logic that says improvements will *only* come through a focus on things that have already been thoroughly researched. ‘Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence’.

In other words, there are aspects of teacher characteristics and student outcomes that are very difficult to research. As a result, little research has been done. This does not mean that focusing effort on them would not produce good outcomes.

There is little research in Australia of the impact of teachers’ subject/disciplinary knowledge *on student outcomes*. Teacher knowledge is difficult to measure accurately, especially across different disciplines, and so are the layers of impact that improved teacher knowledge might be expected to have on student outcomes. Nonetheless, despite this lack of research into student outcomes, there is [good evidence](#) that a subject-expert teacher will:

- be more efficient in planning lessons and finding/developing resources
- be better positioned to understand and implement the curriculum
- be better positioned to differentiate their teaching to suit individual student needs
- have the confidence to provide lessons that are innovative and engaging
- inspire more confidence and respect in interactions with parents
- inspire more confidence and respect from students
- facilitate deeper learning of the subject matter in students.

If the next NSRA focuses solely on improvements that are based in existing bodies of evidence, it will once again skew attention towards outcomes that are easily and currently measured – literacy, numeracy, etc., rather than an improved knowledge of the world and how to engage richly in it.

The Panel considers that a system that delivered equity and excellence would be evident in a greater proportion of students achieving at the highest levels of academic performance, and the likelihood of being a high achiever not being predicted by the level of socio-economic advantage that a student has in their

2.1

household, school or community. p. 12

At a society level, the economic and social benefits of educational excellence and equity are high, including greater innovation and productivity, economic resilience, social stability, and the capacity to respond to current and future crises. p. 13

2.1

APTA supports the contention in the consultation paper that excellent education should be available to students from all backgrounds, and that this would reduce the disparity in educational outcomes currently evident in Australian schools. APTA's focus is the presence of expert teachers in all schools. This could be nurtured by a greater focus in schools' [recruitment](#) and performance review processes on teachers' subject knowledge, evidence of continuing professional learning in their subject/discipline, and engagement in subject networks and associations.

The current NSRA identifies particular cohorts of students who are more likely to encounter systemic barriers within the education system that make them less likely to achieve strong educational outcomes. These are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. p. 13

2.2

APTA acknowledges the complex web of factors that contribute to the disparity in education outcomes between cohorts. There is no simple explanation or solution.

APTA hopes that the Expert Panel will also take into consideration the expertise and subject-knowledge of teachers as one of these factors. This is not to suggest that excellent, expert teachers do not exist in all settings. However, ACER has shown that there is an increase in out-of-field teaching in regional, rural and remote locations. Teacher associations are also aware that learning areas are more often led by, and senior secondary classes are more often allocated to, out-of-field and beginning teachers in small schools and in regional, rural and remote locations. This has an inevitable impact on the depth of subject expertise that students can access.

A lack of teacher subject expertise could be addressed by improved networking and professional learning, but teachers in regional, rural and remote areas have less access to this. Schools find it harder to release teachers because CRT coverage is harder to secure, and the costs of travel and accommodation deter schools from supporting teachers to attend distant professional learning programs. Unless they are partnering with governments or Approved Authorities, teacher associations are rarely able to absorb the financial losses of running professional development in the regions. Many do offer online professional learning options, and some are now developing on-demand courses for new and out-of-field teachers.

Governments and Approved Authorities might focus on how to support teachers to access high-quality, subject-specific professional learning in the regions, and how to encourage regional schools to develop a stronger professional learning culture, as strategies to reduce the gap in student learning outcomes.

<p><i>The performance of Australia’s education system is assessed and reported on against various metrics in the three areas of student achievement, participation and attainment. As discussed in Chapter 6, there are significant data gaps (particularly for equity cohorts and certain learning domains) and inconsistencies in how jurisdictions collect and report data, resulting in imperfect knowledge of how the current education system is serving particular students.</i></p> <p><i>However, too many students are starting school behind or are falling behind in minimum literacy and numeracy standards. p. 14</i></p> <p>APTA would like to see a distinction made between ‘student achievement’ and ‘literacy and numeracy’. The fact that literacy and numeracy are the only things assessed consistently at a national level does not mean they are the only areas of student achievement that matter, or that should be a focus for improvement.</p> <p>When schools are encouraged to focus primarily on literacy and numeracy, they do. When schools are shamed or praised for their NAPLAN results, they learn what is valued. However, the performance of Australia’s education system in science education, health and physical education, financial literacy and economic understanding, design and technology skills, literature and the arts, historical and geographic understanding, knowledge of civic rights and responsibilities – it all matters. This is powerful knowledge that will impact young people’s professional success and their life satisfaction after leaving school. An education that is rich in this knowledge is the right of students from all backgrounds and in all settings. The best path to achieving this is to focus on supporting teachers to develop their subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge.</p>	2.3
<p><i>As the Grattan Institute has noted, quality teaching in the classroom relies heavily on high-quality curriculum materials and planning which carefully sequences the teaching of key knowledge and skills across subjects and year levels. A coordinated whole-school approach to curriculum planning and delivery is necessary to give students the best chance of developing deep knowledge and skills mastery over time.¹ Many teachers face significant challenges in developing high-quality materials on their own, given workload challenges, the need for deep subject matter knowledge and curriculum expertise, and the need for a whole-school approach.</i></p> <p><i>One answer to this could be for governments to increase the availability of comprehensive, quality-assured curriculum and assessment materials that schools could choose to adopt. Teachers could use their professional judgement to determine how to use or adapt these materials to their classroom and students.</i></p> <p><i>p. 20</i></p>	2.4.5

¹ Hunter, Haywood and Parkinson 2022.

The Grattan Institute's Making time for great teaching report noted that while governments have devoted attention to reducing onerous administration and paperwork in teachers' jobs, more attention should be given to helping teachers in core aspects of teaching work, such as curriculum planning.² It pointed to research suggesting that using high-quality shared curriculum resources could save teachers up to three hours a week, while also boosting learning outcomes for students.³ Teachers may also benefit from reforms which provide them with additional scope for collaboration with colleagues to ensure classes are inclusive, effective and engaging for all students.

4.3

The Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement report also recommended creating a common bank of high-quality curriculum resources for teachers and school leaders to cut teacher workload and support quality teaching.⁴ The Grattan Institute found that new curriculum resources should be comprehensive and be quality assured by an independent body, so that teachers can have confidence that new materials are consistent with evidence-based practice, aligned to mandated curriculum frameworks and easy to use and adapt in the classroom. p. 32

Questions

23. *Are there examples of resources, such as curriculum materials, being used to improve teacher workload or streamline their administrative tasks? p. 34*

4

It is APTA's view that while the Grattan Institute accurately identified resource development as one of the factors contributing to teacher workload, it proposed a flawed solution.

Firstly, while teachers do spend a lot of time developing their classroom materials, this is rarely the work that they ask to be relieved of. Their teaching resources are a fundamental expression of their professional practice, and are shaped by their teaching style, their student cohort and their geographical location.

Nonetheless, teachers *do* want easy access to relevant, recent models and examples that have been developed by experienced, expert teachers in their subject area(s). They will then thread together these models and examples with their own research and inspiration to create a learning program for their students.

The problem with the Grattan Institute proposal lies in imagining that it is possible for governments to produce comprehensive, quality-assured curriculum and assessment materials that teachers could easily find and would value.

² Hunter et al. 2022a.

³ Hunter et al. 2022b.

⁴ Productivity Commission 2022.

- Comprehensive?

It may be possible for governments to work with expert teachers and (hopefully) subject associations to produce such materials in mathematics. There are few options and choices within the mathematics curriculum. This is not the case in many learning areas such as History and English, for which the school and/or the teacher chooses what they will teach from a range of possible content topics or texts at every year level. Then within each topic or text there are a range of assessment options that teachers can choose from. This enables the teacher to shape a learning program that suits the interests and abilities of their cohort. Therefore, to provide comprehensive coverage, the government would have to sponsor the development of resources to support every permutation and combination of topics and assessment types, each with differentiation options that cater to all learning abilities and barriers.

It seems likely that governments would begin work in the learning areas where implementing this strategy is more straightforward and achievable, and never actually get around to the many learning areas that are more complex and unwieldy. As a result, this strategy will not reduce the workload of all teachers.

- Quality Assured?

Who would assure the quality of such resources? Who would assure their factual accuracy, pedagogical integrity and currency, alignment with the curriculum (which might differ across the states and territories)? Who would have sufficient knowledge of every content option at every year level in every learning area? What is the likelihood that teachers would agree on the definition of 'quality' with regard to the needs of their particular cohort and context? And how much would it cost to assemble such a body of expertise to write and (vitaly) review each resource, during a teacher shortage?

- Current?

The pool of resources that governments develop and endorse under this strategy would require updating and re-promoting every time the curriculum in any learning area was reviewed, or every time there were new developments in international education practice in an area. This would be an expensive and resource-intensive process, but without it teachers would rapidly lose trust in the resources.

- Cost effective?

When implementing a large-scale, centralised strategy of this kind, governments usually appoint large, expensive, external organisations to take carriage of the process and responsibility for its outcomes. These contracts would need to be ongoing, to ensure currency of the materials. This will prove to be very costly and enduringly so.

There are alternative ways of achieving similar results.

Teachers associations vary in scale and scope. Some offer only professional learning, others offer a wide range of products and services designed to support teachers and improve education outcomes in their learning area. Some partner with governments in the delivery of major programs, others survive on membership fees and professional learning income.

Despite this diversity, teachers associations offer the best existing models for state-wide teacher networking and resource sharing. For example, there are teachers' associations around Australia that offer:

- mentoring programs in which expert, experienced teachers within a learning area mentor and share their teaching resources with teachers from other schools. In this exchange, the rationale of the mentor's choice of topics and assessment modes can be explored
- professional learning conferences and events, at which presenters share a wide range of classroom resources, curriculum plans, assessment tasks and so on
- publications that include a wide array of content knowledge, lesson ideas, assessment tasks and teaching resources as well as links to recent research in the field
- online teacher networks where a teacher can send out a specific question or resource request and receive responses from expert practitioners all over the state.

One of the primary reasons that teachers associations exist is to save teachers' time while improving their practice. Teachers associations have been evaluating and refining this service for decades.

Governments supporting teachers associations to expand and continue this core work would be cost effective and dynamic. The resources would be accessible and regularly promoted, and new resources would be added or shared every year, ensuring that teachers had access to current good practice. Partnerships with curriculum authorities, universities and other bodies could be funded to support quality assurance.

Teachers associations are not-for-profit organisations that are used to operating cost-effectively. They contain within their membership the kind of expert teachers that governments would hope to recruit to write the resources. They also have direct, up-to-date contact details for many of the teachers in their learning area, which would enable them to most effectively 'get the word out' to teachers.

Quality pedagogical approaches also depend on the knowledge and skills of the teacher. These are dependent on the training and mentorship that they receive in their initial teacher education (ITE) program, in the induction and mentoring provided at the beginning their career, and in their ongoing, professional development. The advice from the TEEP on strengthening ITE to equip teaching graduates with evidence-based teaching practices will be considered by Education Ministers in July 2023. The next NSRA could consider the recommendations from the TEEP and other levers to drive the uptake of evidence-based pedagogical models in the classroom. p. 20

2.4.5

APTA would be pleased to see a final report from the Expert Panel that emphasised more strongly the importance of 'ongoing, professional development' in the different learning areas, and the vital role of schools and school systems in funding and encouraging it. This is important at both the primary and secondary school levels.

<p><i>Questions</i></p> <p><i>27. Is there any data not currently collected and reported on that is vital to understanding education in Australia? Why is this data important? p. 38</i></p> <p>There is currently a lack of research into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the relationship between the depth of teacher knowledge and student engagement and/or satisfaction - the relationship between the depth of teacher knowledge and parent satisfaction - the relationship between the depth of teacher knowledge and senior secondary outcomes - the relationship between spending on teacher professional development and student outcomes - the relationship between spending on subject-specific professional development and student outcomes. 	5
<p><i>Questions</i></p> <p><i>35. Are there other objectives for funding accountability and transparency we have missed? p. 42</i></p> <p>Data collection on each school's investment in professional learning, including in subject-specific professional learning, would inform potential research projects such as those listed above.</p>	6
<p>Finally, APTA wishes to note that there are no teacher associations or associated peak bodies represented on the Ministerial Reference Group or the Expert Panel.</p> <p>We are grateful for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the consultation paper and look forward to hearing more about the findings of the Review.</p>	