What the Productivity Commission's NSRA report really says

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is urging the federal government to deliver on their election commitment of establishing a pathway to 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding for Australia's public schools following the release of the Productivity Commission's review of the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA).

The Productivity Commission review was set up by the Morrison Government to fix a flawed NSRA. However, the review did not take into account inequitable funding arrangements for public schools.

"It is a shame that from the outset, the review was prevented from taking into consideration the primary driver of inequity in student outcomes - that is the denial of full and fair funding for Australia's public schools," said Correna Haythorpe, AEU Federal president.

"Improving educational outcomes for all students cannot be separated from school funding. Equitable school funding is a crucial piece of the puzzle that has been entirely overlooked by the review.

"The current NSRA has many shortfalls that fail to address inequity in student outcomes, workforce shortages, escalating workloads and student and teacher well-being. And with the subsequent bilateral agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, it has been used as a vehicle to deliver deep inequality in school funding."

The first Gonski Review set out a clear framework for needs-based school funding, with additional funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Over a decade later, the Productivity Commission's review has raised the same important points about the need to lift the outcomes of students from "priority equity cohorts" but failed to address the funding needs of these students.

"We have been going around in circles for over a decade. When will we address the elephant in the room that is public school funding?" Ms Haythorpe said.

"Let's not forget that every public school student in Australia is currently missing out on an average of $1,800 in funding every year, a damning legacy left behind by the Coalition Government.

"The sad reality is that successive governments have failed a generation of public school students, denying their schools urgently needed resources for more teachers, support staff and additional learning programs, especially for students with additional needs.

"2023 must be the year that delivers full and fair funding for public schools in Australia."

The AEU's attention is turned towards the recently announced review of funding arrangements by federal Education Minister Jason Clare following the extension of the existing NSRA for another year.

"We are deeply concerned about the 12-month extension of the existing NSRA. Resources delayed are resources denied, and public school students cannot afford to wait any longer," Ms Haythorpe said.

"The Albanese Government must meet their election commitment of establishing a pathway to 100 per cent of Schooling Resource Standard funding for public schools across Australia as part of this review.

"AEU members across the nation will be expecting nothing less."

By Rachel Wilson

The ROGS report from the Productivity Commission (PC) is the fourth in a row making important insights on where

Australian education has gone wrong.

The data for the Report on Government Services (ROGS) made it clear that Australian school funding is iniquitous.

While this fact could have been called out on any day in the nearly 11 years since the Gonski report was released, the data establishes it authoritatively.

Previous low-key reports by the National School Resourcing Board and National Audit Office have highlighted the lack of transparency and accountability evident in funding arrangements.

Earlier, the PCs interim report for the quinquennial productivity review in October last year put education issues front and centre of economic concerns and provided a warning bell for their interim report on the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA). Both clearly assert “Canberra, we have a[n education] problem”.

These three identify the threat that arises from our current educational woes and make it clear that there are system structural and transparency faults contributing to our difficulties.

But it is the PCs report on the National School Reform Agreement that provides a fuller analysis of our education system, importantly identifying deeply entrenched system level faults.

Headlines on the NSRA report squealed “Call for focus on teaching as academic results slide despite $300b school funding deal” and “Still lessons to be learned to improve student outcomes” suggesting the problems resided with teachers, in classrooms.

Social media comments were along the lines of “please save us from another report telling us how bad Australian education is” and from teachers: “the start of school year whinge about teachers”.

However, the 350-page NSRA report is not just another highlighting the long litany of stagnation and declines in Australian education.

I would encourage all education researchers to read it, but for fans of Blinklist, I provide a synopsis and explain why.

Teachers are not to blame. Calling out Government and bureaucratic failures

Let’s start at the beginning. The report was designed to examine and evaluate “the effectiveness and appropriateness” in the national school reforms; and “the appropriateness of the National Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (NMFSA)”.

On the reforms a report card is provided in the main report but not the summary report (perhaps this is why the headlines went awry?).

This report card rather optimistically claims that four out of seven initiatives have been achieved. Reflecting on this, I can’t help but wonder what a 3/7 scorecard for a school principal would lead to?

In this case, despite investing $319 billion, key initiatives remain virtually untouched.

The tick against the national teacher workforce strategy seems overly positive, particularly as the National Teacher Workforce Data set is currently incomplete, with only approximately 10 per cent of Australia’s teachers included.

So too the report of “partial” outcome assessment in improving national data quality. As the report goes on to show, the NMFSA data is far from ideal, not aligned to national education goals, and poorly reported on.

If you’re not a fan of educational data please don’t turn away now. You may have been put off by the data we currently have and the focus on how schools will work with it, but data is fundamental to system monitoring – and here is where the core of the problem lies.

The report goes on to conclude:

- The Agreement’s outcomes and targets were incomplete.
- Reform activity has at times lacked focus and flexibility.
- Reporting and transparency arrangements have not had bite.

There may be some bureaucratic euphemism here. On my reading of the situation there were no specific targets, many reforms were not achieved, and reporting and transparency was virtually non-existent.

Still, there are some lessons to be learnt for future reform agreements, namely:

1. Parties should focus the next school reform agreement on directly lifting student outcomes.
2. Adapt accountability mechanisms to reflect a greater role for state-specific actions.

In other words, if there is to be any hope of improving the situation, we need to focus on clear goals for students – and make the system/s accountable.

I have to agree. After all, teachers have been facing accountability pressures for some time and often face the brunt of blame for poor educational outcomes.

From my own research perspective, listening to teachers, I can see much current frustration in Australian education boiling down to the old expression “what’s good for the goose is good for the gander”.

Frequent calls for teachers to lift teaching quality, be more evidence-based in their practice, must be matched by evidence-based policy.

We need more data, transparent reporting and critical system analysis to identify the structural problem at the heart of our current woes.

We need an education system designed for purpose that can pursue the educational goals we have agreed to. And we need upward as well as downward accountability in order to serve students, citizens and society.

Nicole Mockler’s analysis of media suggests the dominant refrain is “we have a teacher problem” but much relies on system architecture, like the NMFSA, where we evidently have some challenges.

Furthermore, there is little evidence to support the assertion that teacher/teaching quality is a problem.

Our system data is simply inadequate to support that assertion. We don’t have adequate data on who and where our teachers are in order to address teacher shortages, nevermind data telling us what they do and how effective they are.

The report goes on to examine some of the dynamics between poor monitoring of educational equity, rising issues with student wellbeing and problems, work demands on teachers and teacher shortages. It makes for sobering reading.

The National Measurement Framework – unfit for purpose?

In its evaluation of the NMFSA the report concludes:

“The Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (MFSA)’s Key Performance Measure (KPM) dataset has reporting gaps against the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) performance reporting framework, particularly on outcomes for students from priority equity cohorts. “

In fact, as the submission from the Centre for Educational Measurement and Assessment makes clear, very little of the data is aligned to national educational goals.

Furthermore, there is inadequate monitoring and reporting on the data available – resulting in poor transparency on how our system is performing, and where trends are heading.
This is particularly the case with educational equity, which is declining, but is not effectively monitored by government reporting.

The outcomes for some equity cohorts, like students with disability for example, are completely ignored in the National Report on Australian Schooling.

The PC NSRA report agrees and concludes:
“The NSRA has an accountability deficit. In addition to the MFSA not being wholly relevant and complete as a tool to measure progress against the Agreement sub outcomes, visibility of governments’ progress is diminished by the absence of standalone reporting.”

Recommendations: Focus on equity, increase system transparency, support teachers and student well-being

These seem like sensible recommendations. Equity, in tandem with excellence is, after all, our number one education goal.

It seems logical we should focus on it, monitor and report on it. Only then can we hope to target money and resources accurately and efficiently to minimise inequity.

The key to building equity naturally requires a focus on students, not only what they learn but how they feel.

Broadening educational goals, and data, to value and monitor student wellbeing is a no-brainer.

And no progress can be made without supporting teachers. Addressing structural and system accountability problems, including poor data, inadequate monitoring for reasonable targeting of funding and resources, poor professional workforce management, will make teachers' working lives in schools much easier and productive.

This is a watershed realisation in a government report, an acknowledgement that it is the system, not teachers, that is failing. That is a good start.

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THE CONVERSATION

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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