

Community sector insights paper

VCOSS response to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System – Consultation Paper



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VCOSS is the peak body for Victoria’s social and community sector, and the state’s premier social advocacy body.

We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where every person and community is supported to thrive. We work relentlessly to prioritise wellbeing and inclusive growth to create prosperity for all.

We achieve these goals through policy development, public and private advocacy, supporting and increasing the capabilities of the state’s social service bodies, forging strong coalitions for change, and explaining the true causes and effects of disadvantage.

VCOSS’s strength comes from its members and the people they serve. Our members include frontline service groups, peak bodies, advocacy organisations and individuals passionate about a fair, sustainable and inclusive Victoria.



Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.

VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.

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Introduction

At VCOSS we know that education is powerful. It is a key to lifting people out of poverty and reducing the socio-economic, political and health inequalities that persist in Victoria and in Australia more broadly. That is why education equity remains an enduring keystone of VCOSS' policy and advocacy efforts.

In 1990, Australia ratified the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which recognizes a child's right to an education that is free, available, and accessible to all (Article 28). It also specifies that education should support the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (Article 29).

Both State and Territory governments in Australia have committed to providing all Australian children and young people with access to a high quality and equitable education. This commitment is enshrined in policy and legislation (including the National Schools Reform Agreement) across all jurisdictions. But despite this, Australia's education system is not currently free, accessible, and available to all as described in UN Convention. This contributes to persistent intergenerational poverty, poor health and wellbeing outcomes, underachievement and inequality that endures across Australia.

VCOSS acknowledges there is a lot of work underway to improve education equity and outcomes in Australia, and in Victoria specifically. In Victoria, the government's systemic reform of the state education system (the 'Education State' agenda) is designed to build excellence and equity in equal measure. Education State targets are intended to focus efforts on measures that break the link between disadvantage and student outcomes.

The next National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) provides an important opportunity to make further strides as a nation to improve academic achievement and health and wellbeing – but it can only do so if all parties to the agreement commit to bold action to tackle inequities that are currently 'baked into' Australia's education system. This submission recommends key priorities from the perspective of community sector organisations that deliver education, learning support and wellbeing programs to children and young people in schools, 'like schools' and non-school (community) settings.

While we know that school funding has been identified as out of scope for the new NSRA, from the perspective of Victorian community sector organisations, how schools are funded is central to the policy conversation – and students' lived experience – of excellence and equity. We urge the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to engage with these issues, irrespective of whether they are formally in the scope of the NSRA or not.

We commend the Commonwealth Department of Education, State and Territory Governments (including the Victorian Department of Education), the Productivity Commission, members of the Expert Panel and Ministerial Advisory Group for the rigorous process they are going through to review the current NSRA and to ensure the next agreement results in a high quality and equitable education for all students.

VCOSS, our members and partners involved with the VCOSS [Education Equity Coalition](#) welcome this opportunity to provide a response to the Expert Panel's [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper](#) as part of the Commonwealth Department of Education's review and redesign of the [National Schools Reform Agreement \(NSRA\)](#).

Summary of findings

Our submission shines a light on innovations in the Victorian education system and the important and long-standing role that community sector play in delivering flexible education models, learning support and health and social services in partnership with schools.

The community sector is active across education, health, and social wellbeing, and plays a significant role in the lives of many Victorians in the communities in which they live, and in many of the services and supports they access. It is a major provider of early years services, a provider of services for vulnerable children and young people, an involved and informed advocate in improving the life chances of disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians, including through the provision of education services, and is also a key partner in the development of research and evidence-informed policy.

Our submission highlights the depth of knowledge and experience the community sector possesses when it comes to understanding and supporting the wellbeing and education needs of children and young people.

To ensure that the next NSRA achieves its goal of delivering a high quality, equitable education for all, VCOSS proposes that the following community sector insights and evidence-informed recommendations should be incorporated into the next Agreement.

Improving student outcomes through evidence-based practice

1. The next NSRA should include a commitment to embedding high-quality small-group tuition in all schools, as well as supports to help schools to successfully implement tuition programs and invest in rigorous trials of tuition programs.
2. The next NSRA should recognise the role that alternative models of education, such as 'like schools' and virtual schools and explore ways to increase student access to flexible learning models Australia wide. In addition, the Commonwealth should commit to undertake research into alternative education models and flexible learning programs, emphasising the innovation in pedagogical and curricular approaches demonstrated through the flexibility of these programs.
3. The NSRA should recognise and support the role of initiatives that strengthen relationships between students, their families and schools and provide wrap-around support with a focus on the students' education and wellbeing needs.
4. The next NSRA must embed the voice of students and their families into the design and evaluation of National Policy Initiatives.

Focusing effort on priority cohorts

5. The next NSRA must address reporting and data gaps relating to students with disabilities and students from Aboriginal backgrounds to ensure that their learning and wellbeing needs are captured and understood so that inequities can be addressed.
6. The Commonwealth should work cooperatively with the relevant state and territory governments to fix interface issues between the NDIS and the education system (as well as other interfacing systems). This collaborative work should actively engage students with disabilities, families/carers, disability advocates and those working in the different sectors/systems to identify issues, develop solutions and design reform implementation so that students can fully participate in education (and other areas of community life) on the same basis as their peers.
7. The needs of novel priority equity cohorts, including students in out-of-home care, those that are experiencing homelessness, from migrant and refugee backgrounds, students that experience racism, and students that have contact with the justice system or that have incarcerated parents should be recognised in the next NSRA.

8. The next NSRA must clearly articulate the role of the education system in supporting students that are experiencing family violence to stay attached to the system to avoid disruptions to their learning, maintain sense of belonging to the school community and gain access to the trauma-informed support services they need.
9. In addition to focusing effort on supporting priority equity cohorts, the next NSRA should embed universal academic and wellbeing support in the education system and support school staff to identify and support students at risk, regardless of their background.

Supporting mental health and wellbeing effectively

10. The Next NSRA should have a focus on health and wellbeing as well as academic achievement, including measures to capture student wellbeing.
11. The approach to supporting student wellbeing and achievement developed by Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) and partners provides a solid framework for supporting student health, wellbeing and achievement. It should be considered in the design of the next NSRA.
12. In developing the next NSRA, State, Territory and Federal stakeholders must ensure that new measures to support student health, wellbeing and achievement do not overburden school staff and leaders. Instead, mechanisms to support students must be developed, harnessing the skills and expertise of the community sector, families/carers and the broader community, including community sector organisations.

Stronger partnerships, connected systems and access wellbeing support outside the school gate

13. The next NSRA should include policy initiatives focused on empowering teachers and the broader community to identify and support students at risk and link them in with relevant services and supports.
14. Both in-school and out-of-school supports play an important role in supporting student wellbeing.
15. The next NSRA should consider how to support young children and children in their middle years more effectively and address current policy and service provision gaps.
16. Integrated child and family hubs provide a proven way to support child health and academic achievement.
17. The next NSRA should acknowledge the role of the community sector and other key stakeholders in supporting student achievement, engagement, and wellbeing.
18. Schools must be funded sufficiently to ensure they have the capacity to build relationship with families and services to effectively support student wellbeing.

Whilst the NSRA review and associated consultation paper does not examine the School Resource Standard or addressing funding inequalities in Australia’s education system, our consultation and research emphasizes the need to address funding inequalities to ensure that all schools have the resources and capacity they need to attend to students’ individual needs and to reduce the pressure on school leaders and classroom teachers. Increased funding is also essential to enable schools to build relationships with families, the broader community and the support services that are essential to student wellbeing and academic achievement.

Finally, if Australian governments are serious about improving the health, wellbeing and academic achievement of our population and honoring our commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, steps must be taken to address the mounting impacts of child poverty, hunger, poor nutrition, housing stress, family violence, racism and inequality and the structural inequalities in our society that perpetuate these issues – issues which directly impact participation and attainment in learning and student wellbeing.

Consultation

VCOSS held an online consultation on Wednesday July 19, 2023, over Zoom to gather insights to inform our submission to the Expert Panel's [inquiry](#). The participants included 34 representatives from VCOSS' [Education Equity Coalition](#).

Attendees represented community sector organisations with specialist expertise in early years, primary and secondary education, health, Aboriginal child health and education, out-of-home care, youth housing and homelessness, youth justice, youth affairs, student voice, disability, family violence, welfare, and parent advocacy groups. Attendees also included academics with specialist expertise in education equity, mental health and wellbeing, and trauma. A full list of the organisations involved with the consultation has been provided in Appendix 1 (below).

To ensure that the consultation had relevance to our members and made the most of their insights and expertise, the discussion questions explored were drawn from Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, which relate to lifting student outcomes and improving student mental health and wellbeing. These questions were explored via breakout room discussions, with an average of 11 participants per room.

The consultation did not include questions from Chapters 3-5, which relate to the education workforce, data collection and funding transparency and accountability. However, due to the interconnected nature of these reform areas, some relevant points were made on these topics during the consultation. They have been included in brief in our submission.

VCOSS' consultation also included several 1:1 meetings and correspondence with member organisations and other key stakeholders with specialist expertise in disability education and inclusion, student voice, parent perspectives in education, alternative education models, evidence-based practice, vocational education and training, and health and wellbeing.

Discussion questions explored during VCOSS consultation:

- Q2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems, and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?
- Q4. Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?
- Q8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government, and the community to deliver this?
- Q13. What can be done to establish stronger partnerships between schools, Local Health Networks and Primary Health Networks?
- Q14. What can be done to ensure schools can easily refer students to services outside the school gate that they need to support their wellbeing? How can this be done without adding to teacher and leader workload?

Response to Chapter 2: improving student outcomes.

Q2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems, and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?

What we heard:

When responding to question 2 in the Consultation Paper, VCOSS members and partners emphasised the need for flexibility and options when it comes to supporting students that are at risk of falling behind. Flexibility was also stated as being key when it comes to supporting students that have already fallen behind to re-engage and stay engaged with and attached to the education system.

Participants made specific reference to the importance of ‘like schools’ in the Victorian system, and the role that the community sector plays in delivering this model of alternative education (including schools run by Melbourne City Mission and the Brotherhood of St Laurence).

Sometimes referred to as alternative schools, ‘like schools’ deliver a student-centred, trauma-informed, strength-based, inclusive learning environment that provides students with opportunities to learn in line with their education and wellbeing needs. They sit alongside flexible learning programs delivered within mainstream schools, programs within TAFEs and Community Colleges and specialist assistance schools that support students who have stopped attending school, or that have unique learning needs.

Participants talked to the value of ‘like schools’ in providing students with wrap-around support including tailored academic support, material aid and the provision of nutritious food, and links to services and trusted, supportive adults – such as youth workers that are embedded in the classroom in some like schools.

The Virtual School model was also referred to as a valuable and important tool for keeping children, young people and their families connected with the education system during times that they cannot attend school because of mental health challenges, other health challenges or other circumstances. For example, participants highlighted the importance of virtual school models for families experiencing family violence, particularly families living in temporary accommodation or transitional housing.

The [Navigator Program](#), which is funded by the Victorian Government and delivered by contracted community sector organisations, was highlighted as a positive example of an approach to supporting students at risk of early school leaving in Government Schools. The Navigator program assists students with school re-engagement, access to support services and provides a framework and support for schools to become more aware of the education and wellbeing needs of their students.

The role of [family engagement officers](#) was also highlighted as an important initiative trialled in Victoria has been found to positively support students and their families to build stronger relationships with schools, identify and support students at risk of disengaging from school.

Participants also highlighted that students are experts in their own lives and that they understand their wellbeing and academic needs better than anyone. There is a need to embed the voices of students and their families into the NSRA and associated National Policy Initiatives (NPIs).

The stakeholders consulted referred to several State and Federally funded programs and practices that currently exist or have been implemented in the past with success. Often where programs and initiatives have been discontinued it has been due to funding cuts, not because the intervention is ineffective. VCOSS members and partners emphasised the importance of not ‘re-inventing the wheel’ when it comes to supporting student’s school engagement, academic outcomes, and wellbeing. Instead, they expressed a desire for the NSRA to result in investments in existing, proven programs – sustaining promising pilot initiatives and scaling proven approaches. VCOSS members and partners expressed the need for coordinated policy approaches and program investments, to avoid duplication and creating an even more complex disconnected system for students, their families/carers and schools to navigate.

What evidence tells us:

Evidence supports the ‘like schools’ model as an example of a flexible approach to education that has resulted in positive education and wellbeing outcomes for young people that have fallen behind, been pushed out of mainstream education, or become lost from the education system altogether. Te Riele (2014) emphasises the leadership of like schools and the opportunities for the mainstream education sector to learn from their innovative approach to support academic achievement, engagement, and wellbeing. However, Te Riele also highlights the need for targeted policy, research, recognition, and support for this model of alternative education, including appropriate and secure funding and long-term commitment.¹

Research also shows that high-quality school-based small-group tuition is one of the most effective learning interventions available.² It is a powerful way to support children who have fallen behind to catch up and can prevent them from experiencing poor education outcomes that stick with them for life. Australian States including [Victoria](#) and [NSW](#) established small group tuition programs in response to COVID-lockdowns and disruptions between 2002-2022.

Emerging evidence from VCOSS [submission](#) to the [Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability](#) as well as studies from Melbourne University³ also highlight the benefits of flexible learning models for some students and encourages policy makers to consider making some of the innovations that came out of the COVID-19 pandemic more permanent features of the education system. This includes education models that support and enable remote learning, promote student agency in their learning, and that provide enriching learning opportunities outside of the classroom environment.

1: Te Riele, Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia. Final report. Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, 2014

2 Sonnemann & Hunter, Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools. Grattan Institute. January 2023

3 Watterston & Zhao, Rethinking the time spent at school: Could flexibility improve engagement and performance for students and teachers?. May, 2023

Recommendations:

1. The next NSRA agreement should include a commitment to embed high-quality small-group tuition in all schools, as well as supports to help schools to successfully implement tuition programs and invest in rigorous trials of tuition programs.
2. The next NSRA should formally recognise and accord value to the role of alternative models of education, such as like schools and virtual schools and explore ways to increase student access to flexible learning models Australia wide for students who prefer to undertake their education in these settings. In addition, the Commonwealth should commit to undertake research into alternative education models and flexible learning programs, emphasising the innovation in pedagogical and curricular approaches demonstrated through the flexibility of these programs.
3. The NSRA should recognise and support the role of initiatives that strengthen relationships between students, their families and schools and provide wrap-around support with a focus on the students' education and wellbeing needs.
4. The next NSRA must embed the voice of students and their families into the design and evaluation of National Policy Initiatives.

Q4. Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?

What we heard:

The participants involved with VCOSS' consultation supported the [Productivity Commission's](#) recommendation that the next NSRA maintain a focus on existing priority equity cohorts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disabilities, students living in regional, rural and remote locations and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. They also confirmed the need to better understand the education needs and outcomes of students with a disability (particularly Deaf and hard-of hearing students) and students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds through an increased focus on data collection, reporting and quality.

Overwhelmingly, attendees agreed with the proposal to add additional cohorts to current list of priority cohorts. Students in out-of-home care, those that are experiencing homelessness, from migrant and refugee backgrounds, that experience racism, and students that have contact with the justice system or that have incarcerated parents were all mentioned as needing additional focus, care, and support.

Participants highlighted the need for the next NSRA to more clearly define the education system's role in supporting children, young people and their families who are experiencing family violence. The group discussed the impact that family violence has on children's education experiences, access, connections and sense of belonging in the school community, and the long- term impacts that the trauma of family violence has on a child's ability to learn.

Homelessness and housing challenges, as well the digital divide and poor digital literacy were also listed as major barriers for many students and their families to have a positive education experience. Participants 'also highlighted the unequal burden of poverty and inequality facing single mothers and their children.

In addition, some attendees talked to how COVID has resulted in a need to re-think the definition of at-risk students and priority cohorts. Services reported that they are currently experiencing an increase in referrals for students and families that would not normally be defined as 'at risk', including an increase in families that are experiencing financial hardship, and students that are experiencing anxiety or other mental health challenges. This reinforces the Productivity Commission's assertion that the Agreement needs to acknowledge that all students can face challenges and require academic and/or wellbeing supports. It is therefore important that schools adopt a whole-of school approach to improving academic outcomes and wellbeing, that universal supports are embedded in the education system and that school staff are empowered to be able to identify and support students and families that are at risk.

Finally, the group welcomed the Productivity Commission's position that belonging to a priority equity cohort does not imply that students are homogenous in their learning needs. Students from priority equity cohorts have diverse education needs, experiences, and ambitions.

What evidence tells us:

VCOSS [submission](#) to the [Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability](#) explored the systemic root causes driving underachievement, exclusion and poor health and wellbeing outcomes for students with disabilities. Issues identified included gaps in laws and policies that are intended to drive inclusion, system-wide practices that create barriers to information and otherwise limit enrolment choice, lack of effective coordination between systems (e.g. education, disability, health) and between settings (e.g. early childhood education and care and school) and access to (and adequacy of) funding for individualised supports, and workforce capacity, capability and attitudes. Our submission also recommended that the Commonwealth Government should identify students with disabilities as a priority cohort and work collaboratively with state and territory governments to ensure the next NSRA – and the associated Bilateral Agreements – will drive tangible improvements in learning and wellbeing outcomes for all Australian students with disabilities.

It was also strongly recommended that the Commonwealth should work cooperatively with the relevant state and territory governments to fix interface issues between the NDIS and the education system (as well as other interfacing systems). This collaborative work should actively engage students with disabilities, families/carers, disability advocates and those working in the different sectors/systems to identify issues, develop solutions and design reform implementation so that students can fully participate in education (and other areas of community life) on the same basis as their peers.⁴

⁴ VCOSS, Left behind VCOSS Submission to the Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability, 2023

Recommendations:

5. The next NSRA must address reporting and data gaps relating to students with disabilities and students to ensure that their learning and wellbeing needs are captured and understood so that inequities can be addressed.
6. The Commonwealth should work cooperatively with the relevant state and territory governments to fix interface issues between the NDIS and the education system (as well as other interfacing systems). This collaborative work should actively engage students with disabilities, families/carers, disability advocates and those working in the different sectors/systems to identify issues, develop solutions and design reform implementation so that students can fully participate in education (and other areas of community life) on the same basis as their peers.
7. The needs of additional priority cohorts including students in out-of-home care, those that are experiencing homelessness, from migrant and refugee backgrounds, students that experience racism, and students that have contact with the justice system or that have incarcerated parents should be recognised in the next NSRA.
8. The next NSRA must clearly articulate the role of the education system in supporting students that are experiencing family violence and homelessness to stay attached to the system to avoid disruptions to their learning, maintain sense of belonging to the school community and gain access to the trauma-informed support services they need.
9. In addition to focusing effort on supporting priority equity cohorts, the next NSRA should embed universal academic and wellbeing support in the education system and support school staff to identify and support students at risk, regardless of their background.

Response to Chapter 3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing.

Q8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government, and the community to deliver this?

What we heard:

Victoria is leading the nation when it comes to building a joined-up education system that promotes academic achievement, engagement and wellbeing and connects the early years sector (through the [Best Start, Best Life](#) initiative) with the primary and secondary, and tertiary education sectors.

The Victorian Department of Education plays a proactive role in ensuring that the community services system and health systems are entwined with the education system. This is facilitated through directly investments in community services and partnerships.

The Victorian Government's Framework for Improving Student Outcomes is a guide for schools that places learning and wellbeing at the centre of school improvement and the redeveloped Framework ([FISO 2.0](#)) is a direct response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and advice from a cross-section of eminent stakeholders.

In response to the Royal Commission, the Victorian Government have also introduced a whole-school approach to supporting student wellbeing through the [Mental Health Fund and Menu](#), [Mental Health in Primary Schools](#) and [Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools](#) initiatives. Whilst they are still being rolled out, emerging feedback from VCOSS members is predominantly positive and promising.

Participants involved with our consultation emphasised that schools should not be a ‘dumping ground for social policy reform’ or place additional pressure on already overburdened classroom teachers and school leaders.

Participants would like to see the teaching workforce empowered with knowledge, information, and training on how to identify and support students that are struggling or at risk, both academically and in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. They also emphasised the need for teachers to be supported by school leaders, and for school leaders to champion and support a whole-school approach to wellbeing.

Further, participants would also like to see school staff trained to understand the impacts of trauma on brain development, and how to support student learning and wellbeing, following a trauma-informed approach.

The central role of the family and carers and the broader community – including community sector organisations – in supporting student wellbeing, inclusion, engagement and achievement was a theme that emerged across multiple consultation breakout rooms. Participants emphasised the need for schools to be funded to do the important work of building relationships with families, services and the broader school community.

Participants highlighted gaps in mental health and wellbeing supports for younger children and children in the middle years (8–12-year-olds) and the need for more focused support for this group.

They also emphasised the need to better support students with disabilities, to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to a high quality, inclusive education that is free from violence and discrimination. They also stressed the need for this cohort and their peers to have access to role models with disabilities from within the school community and beyond, to ensure that they are receiving a strong message that having a disability shouldn’t hold anyone back from achieving success in life. VCOSS members highlighted concerns that students with disabilities are confronted by a culture of low expectations.

Participants spoke to examples of Victorian initiatives (such as School Focused Youth Services) and other tailored, local solutions that have been implemented with success. They talked to the tailored, flexible approach to whole-school approaches to wellbeing as being a critical success factor.

Participants highlighted the value of need for both in-school and out-of-school mental health and wellbeing supports in schools. Some contributors emphasised the power of in-school supports to assist children and young people in situ (which was deemed to be more accessible for some) while others emphasised the need for some students to access support outside the school gates (providing privacy and anonymity). VCOSS’ position is that there should be no wrong door for children and young people – governments must invest in school-based supports and accessible community-based services.

Further, participants stressed the need for the primary and secondary education system to connect seamlessly with the early years education and care (ECEC) system, vocational education and training and tertiary education system. This will ensure that children are ready to start school, that they transition smoothly through the education system and that vulnerabilities are picked up and dealt with across a child’s life course.

Participants talked to the value of co-located services and education hub models as being an effective way to support transitions throughout the education system.

What evidence tells us:

The pandemic has exposed the critical and under-recognised ways schools support vulnerable children and young people to be able to participate in learning, highlighting the potentially detrimental – unintended – impacts of school closures to the wellbeing and achievement of this cohort during disasters and other public emergencies.⁵

Research conducted by the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) and partners highlights the central role of physical and mental health for students in achieving academic success and having positive health and wellbeing outcomes in the long-term. Researchers list mounting mental health issues, hunger, poor nutrition, poverty, education access inequities, funding inequities and unaddressed developmental vulnerabilities as contributing factors in Australia’s declining academic performance and health outcomes. Based on international and local evidence, MCRI have propose a [5-point framework](#) for improving student outcomes and wellbeing.⁶ This approach aligns with the feedback VCOSS received during our consultation.

1. A whole child and whole school approach
2. Co-designed, evidence-based and flexible learning and wellbeing approaches
3. Health and wellbeing as essential 21st century skills
4. Building an engaging culture of health, wellbeing and learning in school
5. Relationships and partnerships between services, families and schools in every community.

The research undertaken by MCRI and partners also highlights the need to address growing rates of hunger, poor nutrition and poverty experienced by children in Australian schools.

Integrated child and family hubs bring together services and supports in a shared, seamless, and united way. Research by [Honisett et al](#) (2023)⁷ has found that co-located and integrated early years and primary school settings have been found to improve child academic outcomes compared to children attending non-integrated models of care and support.

⁵ Rudling et al. *The Broader Role of Schools*, January 2023

⁶ Sahlberg et al. *Reinventing Australian Schools for the better wellbeing, health and learning of every child*, 2023

⁷ Honisett et al. *Child and family hubs: an important ‘front door’ for equitable support for families across Australia*, 2023

Recommendations:

10. The Next NSRA should have a focus on health and wellbeing as well as academic achievement, including measures to capture student wellbeing.
11. The approach to supporting student wellbeing and achievement developed by MCRI and partners provides a solid framework for supporting student health, wellbeing and achievement. It should be considered in the design of the next NSRA.
12. In developing the next NSRA, States and Federal stakeholders must ensure that new measures to support student health, wellbeing and achievement leverage the school platform, but do not overburden school staff and leaders. Instead, a mechanism to support students should be developed, harnessing the skills and expertise of the community sector, families and the broader community.
13. The next NSRA should include policy initiatives focused on empowering teachers and the broader community to identify and support students at risk and link them in with relevant services and supports.
14. Both in-school and out-of-school supports play an important role in supporting student wellbeing and should be resourced accordingly.
15. The next NSRA should consider how to support young children and children in their middle years more effectively and address current policy and service provision gaps.
16. Integrated child and family hubs provide a proven way to support child health and academic achievement.
17. The next NSRA must consider the impact that Australia's growing rates of poverty, food insecurity and poor nutrition is having on students' ability achieve positive education outcomes, stay engaged with school and be healthy and well.

Q13. What can be done to establish stronger partnerships between schools, Local Health Networks and Primary Health Networks?

What we heard:

Some consultation attendees felt that this question was reductive and that it does not sufficiently acknowledge the significant role that the community sector, community health, local government, community groups and other partners play in supporting student achievement, engagement, and wellbeing.

Participants suggest that the next NSRA should result in increasing schools' capacity to prioritise partnership and networking opportunities with services, as well as their capacity to engage in meetings with families. The Victorian Government's Framework for Improving Student Outcomes provides a strong foundation for a national conversation about school-community sector partnerships.

Once again, the need for this work to be funded was emphasised.

Recommendations:

18. The next NSRA should acknowledge the role of the community sector and other key stakeholders in supporting student achievement, engagement, and wellbeing.
19. Schools must be funded sufficiently to ensure they have the capacity to build relationship with families and services to effectively support student wellbeing.

Q14. What can be done to ensure schools can easily refer students to services outside the school gate that they need to support their wellbeing? How can this be done without adding to teacher and leader workload?

What we heard:

As discussed in our response to Chapter 2 (above) family engagement officers were put forward as valuable mechanism for building relationships between schools, families and the broader community. They also provide a valuable resource to support classroom staff to identify students and families at risk.

In addition, participants once again highlighted the value of need for both in-school and out-of-school health and wellbeing supports in schools, and the need for schools to be funded sufficiently to engage in relationship building work with services, students, their families, and the broader community. The scope and impact of recent Victorian investments, for example, GPs and nurses in schools, school-based public dental services and mental health and wellbeing reforms, should be examined as part of the national conversation.

Limitations

The short 3-week turnaround provided to prepare a response to the Consultation Paper has limited the breadth and depth of VCOSS' consultation and submission, as well as the capacity of the community sector to respond. Whilst we believe our submission has captured many important points, it does not necessarily represent the views or experiences of all our members and stakeholders.

Conclusion

Once again, VCOSS welcomes this opportunity to provide a response to the Expert Panel's *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper* as part of the Commonwealth Department of Education's review and redesign of the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA).

We believe that the development of the next NSRA provides an important opportunity to correct many of the current inequities present in Australia's education system and to improve academic achievement and health and wellbeing across the nation.

We commend the Commonwealth Department of Education, State Governments, the Productivity Commission, members of the Expert Panel and Ministerial Advisory Group for the rigorous process they are going through to

review the current NSRA and to ensure the next agreement results in a high quality and equitable education for all students.

Our submission shines a light on innovations in the Victorian education system and the important and long-standing role that community sector play in delivering flexible education models, learning support and health and social services in partnership with schools.

Our submission also highlights the depth of knowledge and experience the community sector possesses when it comes to understanding and supporting the wellbeing and education needs of children and young people. It is essential that the vital role of the community sector is reflected in the next NSRA.

Should the Expert Panel wish to discuss any points raised in our submission, or to undertake further consultation with members of VCOSS' Education Equity Coalition or our members more broadly, we would be very happy to facilitate this.

Questions relating to our submission can be directed to Deborah.Fewster@vcoss.org.au

Appendix 1

List of organizations consulted to inform VCOSS' submission:

- Anglicare
- Australian Education Union
- Barwon Adolescent Taskforce (Batforce)
- Bendigo Community Health Service
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Catholic Social Services Victoria
- Central Ranges Local Learning and Employment Network
- Centre for Child Community Health (CCCH)
- Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY)
- Community Information and Support Victoria (CISVic)
- City Local Learning and Employment Network
- Council of Single Mothers and their Children
- Deaf Victoria
- Disability Discrimination Legal Service
- Early Childhood Intervention Vic Tas
- Foster Carers Association Vic
- Good Shepherd AU
- Inner Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network (IELLEN)
- Junction Support Services
- Live4Life
- McAuley Community Services for Women
- Melbourne City Mission
- Mission Australia
- Northern Local Learning and Employment Network
- Parents Vic
- Swinburne University
- The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
- Uniting Vic Tas
- Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI)
- Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC)
- West Justice
- Western Local Learning and Employment Network
- Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic)
- YouthLaw

