QUT's Centre for Inclusive Education (C4IE) is founded on an understanding that Inclusive Education is a fundamental human right that enables all other rights. The Centre exists to produce research that will reduce exclusion and increase inclusion to provide all children and young people with high-quality, inclusive, and equitable opportunities to learn and develop as independent and valued human beings. C4IE makes this submission in response to the Productivity Commission's interim report on the review of the National School Reform Agreement.

# 1. Lifting the outcomes of ALL students, including priority equity groups

The National School Reform Agreement (NSRA; 2019-2023) has one key objective: to ensure that all students attending Australian schools receive a high quality and equitable education. A key pillar of this objective is to lift student outcomes. The Productivity Commission Interim Report references potential initiatives to lift student outcomes: (i) quality teaching, (ii) making classroom practices visible, (iii) increasing the adoption of evidence-based practices, and (iv) enhancing the national evidence base.

**C4IE members echo the need to lift student outcomes, especially those of students in priority equity groups, and we largely concur with the initiatives needed to do so—but with some qualifications and additions.**

## *1.1 Developing more sophisticated measures of disadvantage*
Priority equity groups, as described in the Interim Report, currently include:
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students,
- students living in regional, rural and remote locations,
- students with a disability, and
- students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

We understand the limitations of existing Australian datasets and classifications, which encourage the listing of broad categories such as these. We also recognise the prior development of ICSEA but, as ICSEA is a school-level measure and does not include disability, it is of limited practical value.

*Recommendation 1.1*
- (a) That Australia develop a more sophisticated measure of disadvantage—like the **Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation**—tailored for the Australian context, to better disentangle the effects of various sources and levels of disadvantage, and to enable more accurate targeting of resources and support.

## 1.2 Extending focus to additional priority equity groups

The Interim report also discusses extending the current priority equity cohorts to include children and young people living in out of home care (OOHC).

We welcome and support this extension but **strongly recommend the extension of targeted monitoring and intervention to children with substantiated reports of actual or risk of harm <u>who were not removed</u> into care.** Quality <u>universal</u> programs are <u>also</u> needed to support **children who have been reported to child protection services but whose risk of harm has not been substantiated** (e.g., where maltreatment could not be sufficiently determined or who were not prioritised for investigation owing to resource constraints), and children reported to child protection services who do not meet the threshold to indicate any risk of significant harm (i.e., did not meet the threshold for further investigation by child protection workers).

We refer to recent research drawing on the NSW Child Development Data Linkage Study (Laurens et al., 2020) which found that **all children with reports to child protection services** were more likely to attain below average, and less likely to attain above average, 3rd- and 5th-grade reading and numeracy, including children with reports that did <u>not meet the threshold to indicate any risk of significant harm</u> (i.e., those that did not meet the threshold for further investigation by child protection workers). **All levels of involvement with child protection services also increased the likelihood of children receiving an early (primary school) out-of-school suspension** (Laurens et al., 2021). After controlling for many (>20) other child, family, and neighbourhood factors that are also more common in children who are reported to child protection services, **children with substantiated reports of actual or risk of harm but <u>who were not removed into care</u> demonstrated the worst academic attainment** (>50% increase in their odds of poor academic achievement relative to children not reported to child protection services), and **experienced comparable risk of suspension as children in OOHC** (>400% increase in the odds of their being suspended relative to children not reported to child protection services).

### Recommendation 1.2

(a) Education must be recognised and prioritised as a core component of assessment and service delivery protocols for all children with substantiated maltreatment, not just those placed into care. In some jurisdictions, this might require legislative changes alongside an increased funding allocation to support the cross-agency sharing of information between child protection and education services for these additional children. Special provisions for children in OOHC, such as Individual Education Plans, are currently mandated in NSW and other states. This finding endorses previous calls for policies that can support collaboration, training, and information sharing between child protection and education systems, as well as other agencies, in order to support the academic achievement of *all* vulnerable children with child protection reports, including via broader provision of universal and targeted interventions, titrated appropriately by level of risk of harm.

## 1.3 Better recognition of intersectionality

The Interim Report brings attention to lifting the outcomes of students in priority equity groups, and discusses initiatives related to the quality of teaching. We will discuss the quality of teaching later in this submission, but first wish to call the Commission's attention to the use of exclusionary discipline in Australian schools, which is currently negatively impacting the Closing the Gap attendance target and disproportionately impacting students in priority equity groups. We concur with the "common concerns raised by stakeholders" (p. 19), described in the Interim Report, that:

> "...some schools in Australia continue to use a 'manage-and-discipline' model, which can result in some students with disability being sanctioned instead of being given the behavioural supports they need, contributing to their disengagement from education".

Note that this problem applies to ALL students in priority equity groups, and not just those with a disability.

**Indigenous students** are suspended and excluded at rates disproportionate to their enrolment, as revealed by analysis of multiple Australian jurisdictions. Analysis of overrepresentation in South Australia (SA) revealed that Indigenous students are issued with Take Homes, Suspensions, and Exclusions at rates disproportionate to their enrolment, which have only increased between 2010 and 2019 (*Inquiry into suspension, exclusion and expulsion processes in South Australian Government schools*; Graham et al., 2020). Compared to non-Indigenous students, the risk of suspension for Indigenous students increased from 2.5 times more likely in 2010, to 3.0 times more likely, in 2019. In Queensland, suspension rates of Indigenous students have risen more steeply than that of non-Indigenous students between 2013 and 2019, particularly during primary school years (Graham et al., 2022). When disaggregating by reasons for suspension, the highest degree of Indigenous overrepresentation was evident for the Disruptive/Disengaged behaviours.

**Children living in out of home care** are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline statistics and face a higher risk of suspension and exclusion compared to other students, as shown by recent data from government schools in Queensland and South Australia (*Inquiry into suspension, exclusion and expulsion processes in South Australian Government schools*; Graham et al., 2020). For example, in 2019, students living in out of home care in SA had 5.8 times the risk of being issued a 'take home', 4.1 times the risk of suspension, and 6.7 times the risk of exclusion. Similarly, in Queensland, students in out of home care have an increased risk of suspension compared to students who do not (3.7 times the risk of short suspension; 3.8 times the risk of long) (Graham et al., forthcoming 2023).

**Analyses of intersections between disability, Indigeneity, and out-of-home care.** Importantly, our current analyses of Queensland data are investigating the increased risks associated with intersectionality, where the risks of being suspended more than double. For example, in 2020, Indigenous students with a disability who lived in OOHC had the highest risk of short and long suspensions, in comparison to students not falling into any of these groups. Critically, these risks increased in a year during which 31 school days were missed due to learning from home or COVID-19 lockdowns (Graham et al., forthcoming 2023).

**Still, our research shows that disability is the common denominator.** In an analysis of intersectionality in the SA Inquiry, we examined exclusionary disciplinary incidents disaggregated by priority equity groups (Indigeneity, disability as recorded for NCCD, and living in OOHC), according to whether they were issued to students who were in one group only, two or more groups, or none of the groups. While 17% of suspensions in 2019 were issued to students in two or more priority equity groups, nearly half (47%) were issued to students who had a disability *only*. In contrast, 5% of suspensions were issued to students who were Indigenous only, and 1% to children who lived in OOHC only. When further disaggregating the 17% of suspensions issued to students in two or more groups, the highest proportion of those suspensions (two-thirds) were for Indigenous students with a disability, and the second highest proportion (nearly 1 in 5) to students with a disability living in OOHC. Disability is therefore a common factor among the groups who receive the highest number of suspensions. Our current analysis of Queensland data is revealing similar patterns.

*Recommendation 1.3*

(a) That the Australian government lead the development of a National Inclusive Education Strategy, which articulates education providers' obligations under the CRPD and the Disability Standards for Education, and which provides guidance on evidence-based pedagogies and programs that could be implemented at each tier of a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support framework.

(b) The Australian Government should establish a national database like that of the Office of Special Education Programs in the United States to publish both student and incident level suspension and exclusion data (for example, through the Australian Bureau of Statistics). Those data should be disaggregated by gender, year level, and priority equity group (Indigenous, disability, out-of-home care, as well as those not in these groups), as well as reasons for and duration of suspensions and exclusions, so that overrepresentation can be identified in both single *and* repeat incidents, for each group, and compared across sectors.

(c) The Australian Government should include suspension and exclusion rates on the My School website and compare like schools and sectors as they currently do with NAPLAN achievement data.

(d) The Australian Government should require each sector as a condition of Commonwealth funding to monitor these data closely and to implement legislative thresholds—*with effective accountability mechanisms*—to trigger:

   i. review of the supports provided for individual students in the above priority equity groups (for example if a principal of a school wishes to suspend one of these students more than twice in one school year)

   ii. implementation of a performance/professional development program if a

school's data indicate patterns of suspension relating to individual teachers or faculty

    iii.  a whole school improvement review if data patterns indicate disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline between otherwise 'like' schools.

(e)  Analysis of suspension and exclusion data could potentially be built into the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT). However, the NSIT currently is not used nationally and has not been designed with the input of inclusive education experts and has therefore nothing to say on universal design, accessible practice, barriers preventing the access and participation of students with disability, or designing and implementing appropriate reasonable adjustments. The current description of 'Differentiated Teaching and Learning' in the NSIT is informed by a formative assessment view of the world and is inadequate to the task for which it has been set. It is more about determining where students are in their learning and what they need to learn next to progress. However, it is agnostic regarding *why* students may be at that point and *how* they might best be taught to progress. This is a subtle but critical distinction commonly affecting the reform of inclusive practice in Australia.

(f)  Revise Closing the Gap targets to include clear and ambitious suspension and exclusion reduction targets, together with the recommendation of culturally responsive pedagogies, and disciplinary alternatives (e.g., restorative practice, social-emotional learning and in-school suspension with a focus on SEL skill building).


### *1.4 Lifting outcomes through quality teaching and evidence-based practices*

We agree with the Commission's statement that we need to focus "on students who have fallen behind, and are at most risk of staying behind (particularly those in lower year levels)" (p. 16). The Interim Report has also identified the need to support student wellbeing to support learning, as part of an intergovernmental agreement to achieve improved student outcomes.

In addition to the approaches noted in the interim report, we call the Commission's attention to two important initiatives that have emerged from the United States, to which we call for greater government attention and for which there should be greater government support.

The first initiative relates to *quality teaching and making classroom practices visible*, and the second relates to increasing the *adoption of evidence-based practices*. Both can be achieved through the systemwide implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and we will discuss this first.

### Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

MTSS is a framework that systems and schools can use to determine which practices and programs are needed for which children, as well as a systematic, organised, and inclusive way

of providing supports to children. MTSS is related to Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behaviour Intervention Supports (PBIS) in that it is a tiered model of support that conceptualises three tiers of provision: Tier 1 – universal (all), Tier 2 – targeted (some), and Tier 3 – intensive (few). MTSS has been progressively implemented in many public school districts across the United States with considerable success following the issuance of Guiding Principles by the Obama Administration and the Office of Civil Rights. The initial aim was to address the overuse of exclusionary school discipline and the over-representation of students from priority equity groups, particularly African American students. MTSS is superior to RtI and PBIS, which are sometimes implemented together, because it recognises the interdependence of (and thus demands attention to) all three developmental domains: academic, social-emotional, and behavioural.

MTSS implementation involves the use of high-quality evidence-based instruction at Tier 1 with regular use of incisive and well-targeted progress measures and data-based decision making to not only identify students who have fallen behind but just as importantly to help determine *why* those students have fallen behind. This information has important instructional implications. Knowing that some students in Grade 1 are not at the same level reader as other children is not sufficient. Does that child need additional support with decoding? How intensive does that support need to be? Importantly, like RtI before it, MTSS is designed to monitor instructional quality; for example, if the percentage of students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in any developmental domain exceeds 15% for Tier 2 and 5% for Tier 3, this should prompt the urgent review of practice in the tiers below. If a large enough proportion of children is experiencing difficulties with reading, and progress measures suggest generalised weaknesses in decoding, then the focus should be on initial reading instruction because the chances are that an incidental approach to phonics teaching, such as that used by Balanced Literacy advocates, is being used, instead of a systematic, structured literacy approach.

Our research examined 118 students' word-level reading trajectories from Grades 1 to 3, and their teachers' reported concerns and supports (Graham et al., 2020). Reading was measured each year using the Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE-2), which assesses both the recognition of familiar words (sight word reading) and the ability to decode alphabetic symbols into their corresponding speech sounds, a foundational component of reading. Analysis of these data enabled the identification of five groups, three of which consisted of students whose word-level reading improved over time (n = 7), those whose reading was consistently average or above (n = 64), and those who consistently fell into the average range (n = 11). Of greatest concern was the finding of two further groups of students who either declined in their word-level reading over time (n = 10) or were consistently below average in all three years (n = 26). While teachers expressed the most concern for students who improved, declined, or had persistently low reading, reading was rarely nominated as an area of concern, thereby impacting the type of support provided. Findings such as these underscore the importance of early identification of difficulties and provision of appropriate supports; yet these results also

point to the necessity of high quality Tier 1 instruction from the outset. In the case of foundational skills such as reading, all children benefit from classroom literacy instruction that is explicit, systematic, and structured, and for some children, this instructional approach is critical to their success in learning to read and thus their ongoing access to the curriculum.

## Inclusive quality teaching: Tier 1 within MTSS

We agree with the Commission that "A new, inclusive approach is needed for students from priority equity cohorts" (p. 18), but we recommend caution. Inclusive education is not an add-on to existing "mainstream" education; it requires a fundamental rethink about who we think education is for, and how education is to be delivered. This may sound fanciful, given the existing constraints of our mass education system, but it isn't. And there are tried and tested systems that can make it work, *if* they are carefully planned, implemented, and supported with fidelity. **This process will be aided significantly through the development of a National Inclusive Education Strategy (Recommendation 1.3). That Strategy should be informed by a tiered supports approach (like MTSS), with evidence-based guidance for schools in the types of programs to implement across all three developmental domains and at which tier (1, 2 or 3).**

As we described in the previous section, ineffective use of progress measures, inaccurate identification of student difficulty, misalignment in the provision of Tier 2 and 3, and use of ineffective programs with low empirical evidence can cement early difficulties. Of the three tiers, however, Tier 1 is the most critical. If Tier 1 provision is not effective, more students will leak into Tiers 2 and 3; students who need not have been there. While we have detailed the effect on outcomes in relation to reading, this is just as relevant to the quality of classroom teaching.

We agree with the Commission's focus on the quality of teaching, but wish to direct your attention to a large body of research, principally from researchers in the Centre for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at the University of Virginia, which **has identified effective, evidence-based instructional practices and made them visible through standardised observation, with the aim of supporting teachers to adopt and implement those practices through explicit feedback and coaching.** The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a pedagogical framework based on empirical evidence of effective practice and validated in over 4000 classrooms, comprises three key domains: instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organisation, each of which can be assessed directly through observation of teacher-student interactions (Pianta et al., 2008). These domains map onto the three generally agreed dimensions of quality teaching: supportive emotional climate, classroom management, and cognitive activation (Fauth et al., 2019).

In classrooms where there is high instructional quality as measured by the CLASS, students are more positively engaged with their teacher. Learning through 'instructional conversations" and feedback is also increased, which leads to greater on-task behaviour (Pianta et al., 2002). An

emotionally supportive learning environment is characterised by sensitivity to students' emotional needs and perspectives, and well-organised classrooms tend to be productive, have effective behaviour management, and a more positive climate, all of which are conducive to productive learning experiences (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). **Importantly, recent Australian research using the CLASS with primary school teachers in Queensland found no difference between beginning teachers (0-3 years experience) and experienced teachers (more than 5-years experience) in the quality of teaching (Graham et al., 2020).** Beginning teachers were also no less effective at behaviour management, however, this study recommend improvement in the quality of teaching overall (Graham et al., 2020). These findings have implications for ongoing teacher professional learning (PL), in addition to initial teacher education (ITE), yet improving the quality of teaching by teachers already in the workforce through the provision of evidence-based, high-quality professional learning, along with the time and support to meaningfully engage in and benefit from PL, has received relatively little reform attention compared to the focus on ITE.

The interim report rightly points to the potential of Quality Teaching Rounds (Gore et al., 2017) as a means to spread professional learning at scale. Quality Teaching Rounds incorporate cycles of teacher professional learning, professional dialogue, observations of each other's classrooms, and opportunities to provide supportive peer feedback. Quality Teaching Rounds do indeed offer an accessible professional learning framework for time-poor teachers to improve their practice. However, another of our recent studies has pointed to a key weakness in existing pedagogical frameworks—which include the Quality Teaching Framework, which is used in QTR—because they do not parse practice at the "level of granularity" needed for teachers to enact *inclusive* quality teaching (Graham et al., 2022). Further, while many existing frameworks, like the CLASS, are student-centred, **there is limited research on what students perceive as quality teaching, and next to no empirical research that disaggregates for students in priority equity groups.** This is extremely important because these students experience barriers that other students may not.

To address this gap, researchers from C4IE conducted research with 50 high school students with learning and behavioural difficulties who were at risk of disengaging from school. Our recently published paper analyses these students' responses to the question "what makes an excellent teacher?" (Graham et al., 2022). The team used the CLASS domains, dimensions, and practice indicators to guide coding of students' responses into "emotional support," "classroom organization," "instructional support." A fourth category, "temperament and personality", was also added. When we coded 90 student statements across these four categories, the majority (40.9%) described "excellent teachers" by referring to their use of practices in the area of instructional support. **Importantly, however, the frequency, intensity, and accessibility of practice required by these students is not a feature of the CLASS, nor any other pedagogical framework in existence.**

C4IE Director, Professor Linda Graham, and PhD candidate, Ms Haley Tancredi, have since developed the **Accessible Pedagogies framework and observational measure, plus an online program of learning** to assess, guide and refine the accessibility of classroom practice. Accessible Pedagogies has been designed to complement existing pedagogical frameworks, and the program's effectiveness is currently being tested with secondary school teachers and Grade 10 students participating in the **Accessible Assessment ARC Linkage project**. As leading experts in inclusive education, it is our view that Accessible Pedagogies is the minimum standard of Tier 1 (universal) teaching quality necessary to ensure that the full range of students enrolled in everyday Australian classrooms can access the curriculum and learn.

Explicit focus on areas of teaching practice, together with the use of progress measures and teacher feedback, is an integral component of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which has also been a key component of reforms in the United States over the past decade. **Our current research has found that teachers not only need but <u>want</u> explicit feedback on their teaching and that the majority want specific and evidence-based criteria to guide that process.** Like the CLASS, both the Accessible Pedagogies Framework and Observation Measure employ specific criteria, a standardised approach to observation, and feedback. There is opportunity to introduce Accessible Pedagogies in ITE as a rigorous means to train preservice teachers in inclusive practice informed by universal design principles, however, our current work with practising teachers suggests that **ongoing professional learning and coaching will be required throughout teachers' careers.** Reviving and making the most out of the HALT initiative could help ensure and retain effectiveness of practice.

## Reviving and making the most out of the HALT initiative

Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALT) have expertise in their diverse local contexts that make them ideal advocates and peer coaches to provide contextualised support for students and staff. In research with HALTs about their impact in schools (Willis et al, 2022a), and in a recent National Round Table report created by representatives from each State and Territory convened by Associate Professor Jill Willis (Willis et al, 2022b), it was clearly identified that these accomplished teachers are not utilised well within their schools.

The roles are not well articulated with other middle leadership roles, school leaders are not aware of the process, and opportunities for collective capacity building are therefore missed. When spoken about in terms of performance pay, or hero teachers, HALT status can generate mistrust among peers. Having a valued title is not the same as having a valued role. The interim report highlights the potential for Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers to share their expertise within localised communities of practice within schools and across schools, regions, and sectors. To achieve this vision, these highly effective practitioners need professional development to support them to lead and coach others, and to articulate what is often tacit expertise to others.

The current HALT application process is rewarding but onerous. HALTs report that deeply reflecting on their work is rewarding, as it is through this process that they recognise their impact with students and are encouraged to share ideas with others. However, the process is onerous as HALT applicants develop evidence of several thousand words, and are required to apply every three years, whereas Heads of Department must only prepare a short CV for ongoing appointment. The temptation to reduce the burden of application by providing templates or constraining evidence of impact on student learning to a few sources will undermine some of the current value for HALTs and schools. Importantly in the current HALT process, teachers articulate a wide variety of evidence about student learning. This variety needs to be embraced not erased, as what enables students in one year level and context to succeed, may not be the same in rural or remote schools. By reviving and making the most out of the HALT initiative, Australia can lead the world in finding multiple types of evidence and contextualised ways to lead inclusive education.

### Recommendations 1.4

(a) Investigate processes for measuring the provision of high-quality, inclusive, and equitable classroom practices (e.g., school connectedness, teacher-student relationship quality) and students' non-cognitive outcomes (e.g., student mental health and wellbeing) to assist in elevating these outcomes to the same level of importance to literacy and numeracy outcomes.

(b) Investigate the outcomes for students with disability who have received adjustments, to identify which strategies are working well and which are not.

(c) Produce rich and robust longitudinal evidence on students' social outcomes to determine the impact of genuine inclusive education, including through the implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and evidence-based mental health programs and practices, on student learning and wellbeing.

(d) Identify ways to strengthen the provision of teacher aide support in an inclusive context and development of high-quality research-based guidelines and professional learning to support regular classroom teachers.

(e) Understand the needs of young people with disability who are transitioning from education to employment, from the perspectives of the young person, their family members and other support networks, schools and community organisations, to build inclusion and strength-based approaches to job search support into the employment assistance services funding model.

(f) Recognise Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers as leaders with roles in schools, with equivalent application demands to other middle leader roles. This may happen if HALT certification is included as a requirement for promotions, and HALT is not seen as performance pay. School leaders and systems need to articulate ways that HALTs can

lead professional learning to enable inclusive education within schools, which may include developing peer networks or peer coaching.

(g) Support Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers to share their experience in expert inclusive practices to build collective capacity within systems. Workshops and training for applicants, mentors, collective approaches to evidence gathering, and work release within schools are immediate actions that are likely to increase the number of HALTs.

(h) Classroom best practice: Funded schemes for educators, allied health staff (such as speech pathologists) and teacher aides to access, high-quality and research-based professional learning on inclusive education and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), particularly in relation to universal design principles and accessible pedagogies at Tier 1, and professional collaboration models for Tiers 1-3.

## 2. Supporting wellbeing to support learning

Members of The Centre for Inclusive Education urge that governments must not only incorporate wellbeing in the next governmental agreement but must also **collect the data needed to evaluate the *effectiveness* of mental health and wellbeing programs being delivered in schools** (Laurens et al., 2022). Extending on this position, **we also urge governments to set national targets and prioritise the development of social-emotional competencies for all children, with the same level of priority as has been established for literacy and numeracy outcomes** (Productivity Commission, 2020). A whole of population approach which extends beyond focusing only on targeted support for children with poor mental health should thus include a suite of universal and targeted programs. The tiered supports available through a MTSS framework are needed.

### 2.1 Evaluating the effectiveness of school mental health and wellbeing programs

**The need to evaluate the effectiveness of mental health and wellbeing programs that are being implemented in schools has been established in Australian research** (Laurens et al., 2022). The Laurens et al. (2022) study found that three quarters of primary school principals reported implementing at least one school-based mental health and wellbeing program, however, many of these programs were supported by little or no evidence of effectiveness. Concerningly, this means one in four Australian primary school principals reported having no mental health or wellbeing program in place in their school.

This research also showed that almost one third of schools (32.7%) reported delivering a school-wide (universal) program supporting the development of a positive school community though building respectful relationships and a sense of belonging and inclusion, with about two-thirds (64.5%) of programs delivered having at least one published study of report on the program's impact on behavioural outcomes. Only two-thirds (60.0%) of principals reported delivery of programs providing formal teaching and practice of social and emotional
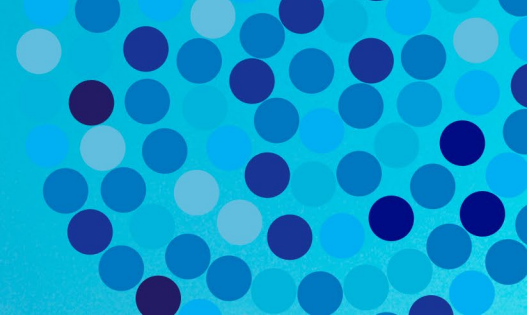
competencies (as required by the Australian Curriculum), using 39 different programs. One third (33.6%) of these programs had low (or no) evidence supporting their effectiveness. And, only slightly more than half included the recommended series of formally structured sessions with comprehensive instructions to support consistent implementation (57.2%), or delivered consistent opportunities for guided in-lesson skill practice of social-emotional competencies (58.9%).

Only around a quarter of principals (28.5%) reported delivering programs to engage parents and careers in bolstering children's mental health and wellbeing, and only about two-fifths (41.5%) of these programs had at least one published study/report on the program's impact on behavioural outcomes. Fewer than a quarter of principals reported delivering programs targeting students with social, emotional, and/or behavioural problems (22.6%), and less than one third (29.3%) of these programs had at least one published study/report on the program's impact on behavioural outcomes.

### Recommendations 2.1

(a) A national approach to strengthening the evidence on school-based mental health and wellbeing programs and their implementation is required.

(b) The adoption of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that encompass universal prevention for all students, targeted interventions to improve the social, emotional, and behavioural skills of at-risk students who need additional support, and individualised intensive supports for students experiencing ongoing mental health and learning difficulties, is required.

(c) Research is needed on how best to support educators in program identification and selection, and evaluation frameworks are needed to provide a structure for evaluating programs in Australian schools with respect to acceptability, uptake, appropriateness, costs, feasibility, fidelity, penetration, and sustainability.

(d) Embedding quality monitoring systems as part of the program design and delivery needs to become a mainstay in Australian schools. Such monitoring systems should include diverse stakeholder perspectives. Intentionality in seeking the views of children and young people who may be more likely to experience threats to their wellbeing and mental health is essential in ensuring programs designed to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing is achieving its goals for the most vulnerable in each school community.

## 2.2 Collect data on student wellbeing to enable reporting on a national measure

The Australian Early Development Census provides a model of national data collection of the social competence and emotional maturity of students as students enter their first year of formal schooling (alongside their language and cognitive skills, physical health and wellbeing, and communication and general knowledge). **Similar data on emotional, social, and**

behavioural functioning (mental health and wellbeing) should be collected by self-report from middle childhood (approximately Grade 4 onwards) through to school-leaving, using age-appropriate measures with demonstrated psychometric properties. These should include the measurement of both social-emotional competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills; the formal teaching of which is required by the Australian Curriculum), but also psychopathology (conduct, attention, peer relationship and emotional problems).

There are various wellbeing measures that have been delivered successfully to large cohorts in Australia, including the South Australian Well-being and Engagement Collection (South Australian Department for Education, 2022) and the Middle Childhood Survey (Laurens et al., 2017), but research investment for further development and testing of these tools is required to evaluate validity across priority equity groups. Student surveys such as these need to become standard annual collections that publicly benchmark student wellbeing, but also provide capacity to schools to measure how these outcomes change in concert with their delivery of evidenced school-based social-emotional learning programs. Capacity to supplement these self-report data with caregiver-report data could be explored.

*Recommendations 2.2*

(a) Implement a national approach to age appropriate, student self-report data collection on emotional, social, and behavioural functioning (mental health and wellbeing) using age-appropriate and psychometrically appropriate tools. Data should be collected at regular junctures from middle childhood until the first year post school-leaving.

(b) Implement a national approach to public reporting on students' self-report of emotional, social, and behavioural functioning, similar to NAPLAN.

(c) Research investment to support further development and testing of self-report tools that gather data about emotional, social, and behavioural functioning, particularly to evaluate validity of such tools across priority equity groups.

(d) Research investment to support development of and testing to establish the validity of tools for caregiver-report data on their child/young person's emotional, social, and behavioural functioning.

(e) The Australian Government should include non-cognitive measures to assess and compare student connectedness to their school and across schools on the My School website, rather than focusing only on literacy and numeracy measures, using scales like the Connectedness to Teacher Scale, the Connectedness to School Scale or the Engagement in School Scale. These data will help parents and others see and compare the connectedness, engagement, and wellbeing of school students as a litmus test. These measures could also be an indication of how inclusive a school is.

## 3. Enhancing the national evidence base

The National School Reform Agreement (2019-2023) has named "enhancing the national evidence base" as a key reform direction. The Australian Education Research Organisation has been established to contribute to this target, however, it is not clear to education researchers how they can be involved. Funding of education research through competitive grants scheme, like the ARC, is grossly insufficient and has been declining for the last two decades. A more reliable research support pathway is needed to ensure that highly promising research, like that being conducted through the Accessible Assessment ARC Linkage, is supported through the research lifecycle so that problems can be identified, solutions developed and trialled in schools, then rigorously tested at scale, and then implemented. This full lifecycle is not possible in three years.

*Recommendation 3.1*

Create a separate education research funding scheme for competitive access to enable the:

(a) development of intelligent solutions to key problems in education based on empirical evidence and expertise

(b) evaluation and monitoring of the effectiveness and progress of reforms, prevention and intervention programs

(c) collection and expert analysis of classroom observation data to "make visible" what is happening in classrooms

(d) independent analysis and mapping of longitudinal trends in school suspension and exclusion, as well as segregation into special schools and classes.
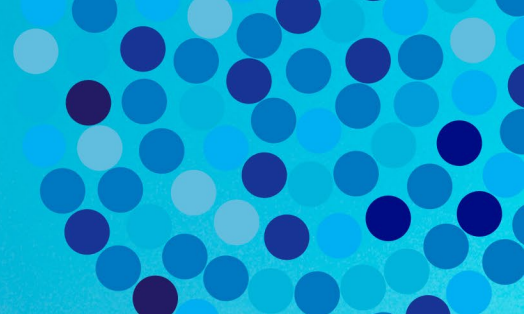
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