

FEDERAL ELECTION 2025

**A new narrative for
Australian schooling:
a prompt for public debate
about purpose and
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"Our greatest accomplishments lie in the positive differences we can make to lives of people who will outlive us" (Kitcher, 2022).

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A new narrative for Australian schooling: a prompt for public debate about purpose and approach

Australian education policy context

Australia's school system, while largely regulated and owned by state and territory governments, benefits from the strengths of its national education architecture. National accountability for schooling has been a key feature of education policy change over the last two decades. This shift is exemplified by the formation of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), Education Services Australia (ESA) and the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). Not the least of these strengths is the regard these institutions have earned from educators.

In addition to this architecture, the *Australian Education Act 2013*, among other things, provides financial assistance to Government, Catholic and Independent schools via the states and territories: increasingly, this financial assistance requires the states and territories to implement nationally agreed policy initiatives on school education.

Relevant to the ISA AHISA February 2025 Forum, the government released the [Better and Fairer Schools Agreement](#) (BFSA) in July 2024. The BFSA is a ten-year agreement and will replace the [National Schools Reform Agreement](#) (NSRA) which expired at the end of 2024. The [Productivity Commission's 2022 review](#) of the NSRA found the NSRA had done little to improve student outcomes. Given that finding, the ambition and scope of BFSA was expanded to address the marked gaps in student outcomes that national testing continues to record.

The BFSA contains new funding arrangements to improve student outcomes and to provide stronger support for identified student cohorts. The BFSA also aims to meet the government's commitment to fully fund schools to 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

The BFSA outlines national reform directions and identifies three (3) national priority areas:

- equity and excellence
- wellbeing for learning and engagement
- a strong and sustainable workforce



Each of these priorities has measures and targets to:

- increase Year 12 completion
- boost general school attendance rates
- implement a Year 1 phonics check (already available in most states and territories)
- implement an early years numeracy check (to be developed)

The BFSA also sets out national initiatives which will require collaboration across jurisdictions. One of these is to undertake a review of the SRS base and loadings calculation methodology. A review of this methodology was not within scope of either the Productivity Commission or BFSA reviews.

Policy foundations

The BFSA aims to realise the principles of the [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration 2019](#). The *Mparntwe Declaration* sets out a vision for Australian education and includes a suite of policy documents on national education goals and commitments up to 2029. The *Declaration* replaced the *Melbourne Declaration* (2008) and provides a foundation for the Australian Curriculum. The *Mparntwe Declaration* has two interrelated goals:

1. The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.
2. All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.

Whilst these goals resemble the *Melbourne Declaration*, the *Mparntwe Declaration* renews emphasis on closing the gaps in educational achievement and preparing students for a rapidly changing and challenging world, to ensure “the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion”. A distinguishing feature of the *Mparntwe Declaration* is the elevated emphasis on the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This priority is a direct response to the widening achievement gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students.

Falling short

The Smith Family reminds us that current Year 9 NAPLAN data show that disadvantaged students are more than four years behind their advantaged peers and one-third of disadvantaged students don’t meet minimum literacy and numeracy standards (Taylor, 2025).

Juanita Pope, CEO of the Victorian Council of Social Service states that “Children who are living in poverty are at increased risk of poorer socio-emotional functioning, school failure, chronic disease, mental illness, reduced economic opportunities and intergenerational adversity” (Pope, 2025).

Federal education minister, the Hon. Jason Clare told ABC Radio: “if you’re a young Indigenous man today, you’re more likely to go to jail than you are to go to university” (ABC Radio, 2023).



In this climate, prioritising equity and wellbeing is a laudable aim and one that rightly belongs at the centre of national education policy. AHISA welcomes this development and applauds the aims of the BFSA to drive real improvement in student outcomes and wellbeing, with a particular focus on students from social cohorts most at risk of falling behind.

That much is surely agreed. Less agreed, perhaps, is the question of how that ‘drive’ should be executed. Not only to arrest the widening gap in achievement, but also to reverse it? Are current policy settings and policy approaches working? The overwhelming evidence indicates that they are not.

AHISA raises the critical question of whether the BFSA is merely more of the same, but with expanded targets and specific measures – putatively digging a deeper hole? Or does the BFSA represent the ‘deep and transformative’ change (Masters, 2023) researchers, school leaders and teachers have been calling for? Does Australian education need a refreshed narrative about the purposes of Australian schooling, and do policy-makers need to be reminded about how children learn? AHISA believes we do.

Reviving the narrative

Professor Geoff Masters (Masters, 2023) identified two challenges for the reform of school education. Better preparing students for their future and ensuring every student learns successfully were deemed to be urgent global imperatives. Masters stressed these challenges must be addressed by “deep” reforms and a willingness to “transform” the external frameworks in which schools work. In Australia, he added, these reforms “are no less urgent”.

As a contribution to the debate about the future of schooling in Australia, Masters’ article is timely for its acute recognition of the personal, holistic and developmental nature of learning. In other calls for school reform, we are beginning to see glimmers of sunshine that “learning is a remarkably dynamic process” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *How Students Learn*, 2018).

In contemporary education policy narratives... the complex dynamics of learning and human development have taken backstage to a paradigm of schooling that conceives education as a narrowly cognitive process, valued for its functional utility and its primary contribution to economic growth and national prosperity. (Rudd, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010)

In contemporary education policy narratives, however - nationally and globally - the complex dynamics of learning and human development have taken backstage to a paradigm of schooling that conceives education as a narrowly cognitive process, valued for its functional utility and its primary contribution to economic growth and national prosperity (Rudd, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). This dominant ‘human capital/economic man’ (homo economicus) paradigm is manifested in publicly accessible measures of students’ cognitive skills in a knowledge economy. In Australia, NAPLAN is now the key measure of the performance of Australian students and Australian schools: and by default, performance in NAPLAN has become the surrogate goal of Australian schooling – conflating means with ends. NAPLAN is also the yardstick used to prioritise and distribute most educational effort. In tandem, the

OECD's Performance in International Student Assessments (PISA) has become the KPI of national education systems.

The persistence of this paradigm – an historically radical but thoroughly normalised 'performative' model of schooling (Duncan & Sankey, 2019) - can be illustrated across multiple dimensions. Internationally, the World Bank requires developing countries seeking development funding to submit their PISA scores, along with their GDP data, a requirement underwritten by studies correlating GDP with PISA outcomes; during the 2007 federal election the Opposition published *The Australian economy needs an education revolution: New Directions Paper on the critical link between prosperity, productivity growth and human capital investment* (Rudd, 2007); the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) emphasises the "nation's ongoing economic prosperity" ahead of "social cohesion"; conspicuously, the 'Productivity' Commission was deployed to conduct the review of the National School Reform Agreement (December, 2022) which led to the Expert Panel's review of the BFSR; and not least, Australia's bold ambition to be ranked in the top five nations in PISA by 2025 still remains legislated in the *Australian Education Act* (2013).

Policy oscillations – some history

In 2003 the Australian government introduced a values-based approach to Australian schooling. The Australian Values Education Program (AVEP, 2003-2010), described as the 'core' of Australian schooling, placed moral inquiry at the centre of schooling and privileged the teaching of values over academic outcomes. AVEP developed a *National Framework* through which Australian schools could provide values education in a planned and systematic way. Seven years of research involving 50 academic researchers, hundreds of schools, thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of students concluded that values education - or values pedagogy - enhances academic focus and academic diligence, raising the thorny question that academic success may best happen for students when it is not the primary focus of their learning.

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Internationally recognised, AVEP projects focused on student wellbeing, resilience, positive education, social inclusion, service learning, civics and citizenship, and indigenous, interfaith and intercultural approaches. Ten principles of good practice values pedagogy were established, and five key impacts were identified: value consciousness; student wellbeing; agency; connectedness and transformation. AVEP gathered broad-spectrum evidence to support the fundamental role that emotion, sociality and moral awareness play in learning and development. Supported by emerging insights from neuroscience, AVEP argued that good practice pedagogy must be directed to the whole person and relies upon the brain being stimulated in a morally ambient learning environment (Lovat & Toomey, 2010).

2008

In 2008 the Australian government introduced a 'performative' paradigm of schooling (Duncan & Sankey, 2019), abandoning AVEP. Dubbed the 'Education Revolution (ER)', a

series of ambitious and multiple reforms, largely borrowed from the UK and USA, were aimed singularly at lifting the academic achievement of Australian students and the performance of Australian schools. The centrepieces of those big reforms were NAPLAN (2008) and MySchool (2010) which remain with us today. Characterised as “test-focused schooling” (Lingard, 2010), assessment became the “major steering mechanism of Australian schooling..... reconstituting education as a central arm of national economic policy” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The ER reached high-water mark with Prime Minister Gillard’s call for Australia to be ranked fifth in PISA by 2025. The bold instrumentality of the ER, which privileges cognitive learning in a knowledge economy, and testing as the key instrument of policy leverage, has not delivered the desired academic effects: particularly at the secondary level, where the decline in the acquisition and application of literacy, numeracy and science skills is most pronounced (Masters, 2020). This outcome could be regarded as perverse given the priority all levels and persuasions of government have given to literacy and numeracy achievement.

The abandonment of AVEP in favour of the ER indicates that Australian schooling has been dogged by two highly divergent – one is tempted to say, dichotomous – paradigms of schooling. The visions of education rendered in these abrupt policy shifts suggest Australian schools have been orbiting in a parallel universe, where the development of cognitive skills in a knowledge economy has been pitted against a vision of education that attends to the ambience of the learning environment to promote wellbeing and moral awareness. Not for the first time in education, a dualistic either/or mindset prevailed.

Where to now?

International research continues to find Australian students report a poorer sense of ‘belonging’ at school (Thomson et al., 2020). That negative emotions associated with ‘not belonging’ play a critical role in a student’s academic diffidence and *feelings* of diminished competence come as no surprise to anyone who has worked in a school.

More recent insights from educational neuroscience offer neural explanations why emotional and social factors, like care, trust and empathic character, are so central to well-being and academic achievement (Lovat, Toomey, Clements & Dally, 2011; Lovat & Toomey, 2023).

Mary-Helen Immordino-Yang, Professor of Educational Neuroscience, University of California observes:

Modern biology reveals humans to be fundamentally emotional and social creatures. And yet those of us in the field of education often fail to consider that the high-level cognitive skills taught in schools, including reasoning, decision making, and processes related to language, reading, and mathematics, do not function as rational, disembodied systems, somehow influenced by but detached from emotion and the body (Immordino-Yang et al., 2007).

But it appears that policy makers have been slow to notice that narrowly cognitive (performative) models of schooling are failing our children and that a more integrated and

holistic vision for education, especially in Australia, is in dire need of re-articulation. That vision must first restore the human and moral purpose of schooling - that education, one way or another, should be a process of moral inquiry (Kitcher, 2022), founded on a fundamental question that has guided education for millennia: 'what makes a human life go well'? Almost a century ago African American scholar William Du Bois wrote that "the object of education is not to make men carpenters but to make carpenters men (Du Bois, 2019). The economic purposes of education will take care of themselves when all students become successful learners, too many of whom, at the moment, are not.

We want *all* children to emerge from school with valued skills, knowledge and understanding which make their own lives, and the lives of others 'go well', and indeed more fulfilling, strengthening civic engagement and deliberative democracy. That not all or enough Australian children emerge from school in this condition is something that should trouble everyone, but as we have seen, the one-sided solutions proposed both by AVEP and ER don't cut it, one side almost excluding what the other proposes.

The sharply alternating visions of education we have witnessed in Australia have placed unwarranted demands on schools and school leaders as they juggle the polarising values and demands of policy. These demands at the school level, and the lack of a holistic vision about the moral, human and civic purposes of schooling at the national level, may well be contributing to the decline and widening gaps in the achievement of Australian children that national and international testing continues to record.

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A new narrative?

Easing our anxious attention to league tables would be one place to start. That anxiety could be reduced by reforms to NAPLAN.

A doctoral study on the neurodynamics of feedback (Duncan, 2021) showed how NAPLAN could be reconfigured to provide immediate and 'value-salient' feedback to both correct and incorrect answers. This could transform NAPLAN into a digital learning tool, in addition to its role in national assessment. More immediate feedback was one of the recommendations of the McGaw (2020) review of NAPLAN.

Re-purposed, NAPLAN would provide multiple answering opportunities until the correct answer is 'fed back'. This process of 'second-chance' learning, so crucial to the social cohorts targeted in the BFSa, enables students to 'rethink' or 'revise' their responses - the point of feedback and the hallmark of learning - rather than shut the gate on an incorrect answer. Second-chance learning eases the 'taint' or 'sting' of error and enables students to 'emotionally reset' for the next question, rather than dwell or 'ruminate' on the negative feelings that accompany mistakes: a concept newly understood as the emotional burden of error (EBE), detectable under electroencephalogram (EEG) analysis. The EBE is a powerful



dynamic that's always 'in the air' in any school setting and these emotions are crucial predictors of success or failure at school.

Marks or scores for NAPLAN would be credited based on the least number of answering attempts and national data could identify those questions which require the most responses. Formative national data could focus on teaching interventions which reduce incorrect answering attempts. The idea of providing immediate, corrective but 'value-salient' error feedback is based on the work of eminent French neuroscientist Stanislaus Dehaene (2020).

Such a reform implies a new narrative and a new approach: gearing learning intentions to value-oriented ends, understanding learning in terms of its emotional dynamics, and couching national policy in the language of care, trust, moral inquiry and empathy: rather than, as it is now, engraved in the utility of measurement-related cognitive outcomes. Such a move is anchored in the new Science of Learning and Development in Education (SOLDE) (Kim & Sankey, 2022) - too long ignored in cognitive psychology and studies of learning which appropriate the brain as an 'information processor' (Cognitive Load Theory, for example). These emotional dynamics play a critical role in problem solving, higher-order thinking and academic confidence. For school leaders this is hardly new. And all good teachers know that the affective dimensions of school life involve a complex web of conscious and subconscious evaluations of the personal and social dynamics that become woven into the fabric of academic confidence and educational achievement (Immordino-Yang, 2011).

Conclusion

The abandonment of AVEP in 2010 in favour of the ER and the assessment regimes of NAPLAN, My School and PISA indicate that two decades of education policy in Australia have been pulling in different directions. Underpinning this dualism is a fundamental schism between cognition and emotion which can longer be justified. Our increased understanding of the 'emotional brain' and the 'intertwined' nature of cognition and emotion suggest that the 'propositions' of knowledge and the 'disposition' of the learner need to coalesce in a more expansive vision of schooling: one better informed by a range of discourses, and one clearly less tendentious than those we have witnessed in Australia over the last two decades.

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