

A Level 11, 456 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne VIC 3000

T + 61 3 5955 2412

E aare@aare.edu.au

W www.aare.edu.au



Australian Association for Research in Education Submission to the Inquiry into Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024 [Provisions]

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024 [Provisions].

AARE is the premier professional association for educational researchers in Australia. Established in 1970, the Association has provided support for successive generations of educational researchers from Australian universities, governments, schools, and private research agencies. Its objectives centre on advancing scholarly inquiry in education, enhancing quality in educational research, and seeking to promote the effective and positive impact of educational research on policy and practice in education and associated areas of society. We forge connections with all those concerned about education research and its translation and have long-established links with similar organisations internationally. We have a strong record of providing support and capacity building to education researchers from a wide range of areas, organisations, and disciplinary specialisations, holding an annual conference, and a full calendar of seminars, workshops and cross-sector forums.

The following comments and recommendations reflect the concerns and remit of AARE as a national member-driven association for educational researcher and draws on a wealth of expert educational research.

1. The Bill does not meaningfully contribute to its stated aim of supporting better and fairer schools

Researchers from the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) have documented the underfunding of public schools and its impact on students and teachers for decades. We question the effectiveness of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), as 98% of public schools in Australia remain underfunded as of 2024. In our view, it is unacceptable that a needs-based school funding framework has failed to deliver full funding to the schools that need it most since its implementation a decade ago in 2014. While we acknowledge the symbolic importance of this bill in opening the possibility for future increases in the federal government contributions to the SRS of public schools, it does little to address the ongoing underfunding crisis. Additionally, we note that amendments to the Australian Education Act (2013) are necessary for the federal government to fulfil its school

funding commitments, including the planned transition toward a 22.5% contribution for Western Australia and Tasmania, and 40% for the Northern Territory. In our view, this bill is a distraction from the broader issues facing Australian schooling, the way schools are funded and how that funding is spent.

2. The Bill and state agreements are out of step with evidence from research funded by government

The Federal Government is ignoring findings from a large body of research it has funded through the Australian Research Council and other schemes. Funded research undertaken by educational researchers has demonstrated that continued underfunding of some schools and overfunding of others exacerbates educational inequalities and drives down overall system performance. Imposing teaching methods and testing regimes, part of the conditions in state agreements, has not worked to improve outcomes for all students. It has also been shown to contribute to teacher dissatisfaction and attrition, as well as to student disengagement. Further, the benefits claimed for measures imposed upon schools through state agreements are supported by a narrow, selective and contested evidence base. The reliance on advice from a single perspective, that of the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), reduces the capacity of the present Bill and other legislation to fulfil its aims. In addition, greater support is needed for undertaking high quality research in public schools, including by improving access to schools for research and research training, and by supporting teachers to actively engage in research themselves. Current Federal and State approaches too often cast teachers as recipients of knowledge from above, ignoring their own expertise and the specificities of school context and student needs. In this scenario, the impact of AERO needs to be evaluated and accountability measures strengthened within a broader review of the use of research in policy and legislation development.

3. The Bill does not recognise inconsistencies in the application of the Schooling Resource Standard

For schools to become better and fairer, there is a need to recognise not only that many schools are underfunded based on the SRS, but also that public funding from both Federal and State governments is used to overfund other schools. Public funds should be redirected so that all schools are funded up to the SRS, combining all funding sources.

Overfunding is a serious failure of public policy and a misuse of public funds. Further, the SRS itself is inconsistently calculated. Jurisdictions are currently permitted to claim 4% of their expenditure on items not directly related to a students' educational needs, such as capital depreciation. This unfairly impacts public schools as the same rule is not applied to private schools.

4. The long-term costs of underfunding public schools have not been adequately considered

The social and economic consequences of the long-term underfunding of public schools are high for individual students and for society. The costs fall highest on students who can least bear them, including Indigenous students, students who are growing up in low SES communities, and students with disabilities, thereby locking in inequality. These groups are disproportionately concentrated in public schools. Underfunding schools worsens the working conditions of teachers, contributing to stress and attrition. It accentuates

socioeconomic segregation between schools funded at different levels, reducing the capacity of public schools to function as effective learning environments. Underfunding also results in many Principals dedicating time to securing additional funding streams rather than leading their schools. Funding for public schools should be provided by the government as a robust, reliable and consistent form of funding. Funding for public schools should *not* be subject to ad-hoc, competitive applications that tend to be delegated onto individual principals as time-consuming tasks of preparing applications. These exacerbate funding gaps between schools, rather than address funding gaps. Ad-hoc and competitive funding from philanthropic or private organisations should be subject to regulations and size limitations and should only be in place once public schools are fully funded.

5. Within the terms of the Bill, the minimum Federal contribution must be raised to 25%

The minimum Federal contribution for full SRS funding is 25%. The Bill identifies a minimum Federal contribution of 20%, well below this minimum and also below the rate already agreed to for some jurisdictions. As such, the Bill leaves open the possibility of future governments actually reducing contributions from agreed rates. As negotiated agreements retain underfunding, the capacity of these

jurisdictions to meet targets is severely restricted. Enrolment drift is likely to further undermine public schools as long as underfunding persists. The targets themselves risk exacerbating existing problems, such as teaching to the test. We question the narrow focus on NAPLAN performance as a measure of improvement. A wider set of measures should be developed based on the excellent research base already available.

To conclude, we urge the Senate Education Committee to consider the full and adequate funding of public schools as a matter of the utmost importance and urgency. Without more substantive measures to turn around a situation of prolonged and chronic underfunding, we will be cementing inequalities in Australian schooling and society for generations to come.