AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS LTD

Submission to

Implementing the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 Consultation

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Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations is a peak community organisation and the
One voice for every child in government education

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No

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

SUBMISSION TO
IMPLEMENTING THE SUCCESSOR PLAN TO THE
NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN 2009-2020
CONSULTATION

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in government education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation process, Implementing the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

ACSSO is strongly dedicated to the well-being of Australia's children and youth. As caring adults, we want to keep children as safe as possible.

ACSSO believes that the values and principles at the heart of any framework or child protection strategy needs to be the affirmation of the developmental needs and wellbeing of children and make the best interests of the child as their primary consideration. This child-centred approach ACSSO believes is consistent with the values and principles contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Therefore, an important part of any child protection work must be the participation and leadership of the children themselves.

ACSSO's submission will focus on the priority areas agreed in principle by Community Services Ministers in April 2021.

Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems.

Most people are aware of the statistics that indicate significant educational and social disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Indigenous youth do not graduate from school at the same rate as non-Indigenous youth. These realities are extremely concerning. What is of paramount concern is the context in which these inequities occur, namely, the way social, historical, political, and economic factors have shaped and continue to shape Indigenous peoples' education.

The issues that give rise to the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system are complex and multi-faceted. For example, low income, which is one of the inter-generational effects of racism in society, ACSSO believes is a major driver of intervention for Indigenous children. Additionally, the possibility for embedded systemic racial discrimination in the system plays a significant role.

While removing indigenous (or any) children from their families to protect them may be necessary in some cases, ACSSO suggests that in doing so, it perpetuates many negative and long-term effects associated with being placed in care. These could include higher rates of youth homelessness, lower levels of post-secondary education, low income, and high unemployment. We also understand that when compared to youth from the general population, youth in out of home care are also at much greater risk for becoming involved with the juvenile criminal justice system.

Because of racial disparities in out of home care, Indigenous children may be disproportionately likely to experience these negative effects.

ACSSO believes that eliminating indigenous and ethnic educational inequities, and by default a reduction in the over-representation in our child protection systems, will require addressing inequities which include institutionalised racism. We need to ensure Australia's education system is appropriate and equitable.

The health, safety, and well-being of all people in Australia, including Indigenous Australians must remain a top priority for all. Therefore, we must support distinctions-based measures to ensure educational, financial and community supports are in place for Indigenous communities (and others) and provide them with the flexibility they need to address the specific needs identified by communities and their members before the crisis point is reached.

ACSSO supports the approach outlined in the discussion paper with the successor plan being 'committed to taking a partnership approach to driving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by building on the relevant priorities and principles National Agreement on Closing the Gap'.

A national approach to early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage.

Early childhood social and emotional development underpins social, emotional, academic, and other outcomes. Differences in socioeconomic status often translates into inequities in child development. It is well established that health follows a social gradient: progressively better health and education is associated with increasing socioeconomic position. The circumstances in which children are born will, in the majority of cases, determine their exposure to environments that promote or compromise a healthy development.

Each person, family or community has a unique interface between their health, education and social care needs and necessitates a personalised response from government services. ACSSO posits these complex needs are not easily defined, as they depend on the individual and their situation and are often referred to as 'multiple unmet needs'.

When addressing 'unmet needs' for families who are marginalised, what is fundamentally a social or historical phenomenon is often presented as a biological or psychological trait. They are then perceived as not deserving of support because it is their 'fault' they are in their present situation.

It is important to also consider the effects of intergenerational trauma on Aboriginal people and communities. The impact of colonisation on Indigenous Australians continues to contribute to the health and social inequalities they experience.

Effectively responding to these challenges and building on the strengths and opportunities that their culture brings – and ensuring that Australia's education systems and practices support all children to engage with education in a manner that allows them to become the best one can be – requires all schools to support and improve:

- access and participation
- knowledge and awareness
- understanding, empathy, and advocacy.

In support of early intervention and targeted assistance, information sharing must be a priority. However, there need to be strict guidelines (with built in protections for the child and family) on

how to share information between government departments, educational bodies, health care bodies, police services, parents, and guardians.

The ultimate goal should be to give families the support and assistance they need to address the challenges they face and ensure the children stay in their care. After decades of families being torn apart by "the system", it is important that we provide circumstances in which families can stay together and learn. All levels of government need to work towards addressing widespread social challenges that lead to situations in which children are removed from their parents.

Improved information sharing, data development and analysis

As stated previously in support of early intervention and targeted assistance, information sharing is, and must be, a priority. Because child abuse and neglect are a community concern, each community has a legal and moral obligation to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, which includes responding effectively to reports of child harm.

Families who need assistance from government and non-government agencies, come from diverse family structures, cultures, races, ethnicities, religions, economic status, beliefs, values, and lifestyles. Agencies and caseworkers need to be responsive to, and demonstrably respectful of, these differences. Often securing access to services and resources means helping families overcome barriers entrenched in poverty or discrimination.

Agencies can respond better if they collaborate with other organisations that may be supporting the family they are working with. Working together in this way means consistent advice can be given to clients across different services and ensures a wholistic approach to the challenges they face. Collaborative practice also reduces the risk of families re living trauma by minimising the need to tell their story again to other workers.

Having acknowledged the importance of being able to gather and share relevant information, this **must** be balanced with strong information and data protection obligations including the need to ensure that the personal data collected is accurate and complete, especially as it is likely to be used to make a decision that affects a child or their family or to be disclosed to another organisation. There needs to be guaranteed assurance that the data is accurate and complete at all times. Inaccurate data may have devastating effects on decisions made and can bias organisations if incomplete/inaccurate data is shared.

Strengthening child and family sector workforce capability.

Positive outcomes for children and families involved with out of home care are often due to the strong commitment of a dedicated child welfare workforce. ACSSO acknowledges that the system is dependent on well trained quality personnel to manage and provide services to children and families.

To serve families well, child and family welfare agencies must have a competent, skilled, and informed workforce guided by a capable and visionary leadership.

Strengthening the child and family workforce is at the heart of protecting children from violence, abuse, exploitation, and harmful practices.

ACCSO concedes that the work is highly stressful, emotionally taxing and, at times, can result in secondary trauma. Therefore, the recruitment, preparation, support, and retention of the workforce are important and ongoing concerns.

The recruitment of Indigenous Australians to work with Indigenous families and communities is a critical factor in adding strength to the workforce. In the recruitment of Indigenous Australians there is a need to recognise that many Indigenous people are still suffering from the intergenerational impact of a system itself. Their educational needs were not suitably addressed, there also was no acknowledgement of their cultural practices, laws, and traditions for caring for their children passed on.

Consequently, there is the need to develop strategies to foster the trust and well-being of the workforce. The sector workforce capability, ACSSO believes, is characterised by specific sets of functions, structures and capacities, and characteristics are determined by socio-cultural, historical and the political context. They encompass both formal and informal aspects at different levels (family, community, state and national) and can benefit from positive inter-linkages.

ACSSO believes there is an urgent need to improve the status and conditions of the workforce. This we feel will result in the retention of a competent and socially committed workforce.

The discussion paper acknowledges the need to bring together the government, non-government organisations (NGO) and First Nations community-controlled sectors, across areas including health, disability services and social services. It is a major concern to ACSSO that many "sectors" were named however there was no mention of education/schools or early childhood settings.

When school and child welfare personnel work together with a common understanding, ACSSO believes, they can design and implement overarching policies that increase the efficiency of the agencies and ensure positive experiences for students.

ACSSO believes there is a need for a range of early support programs that are available to assist families with multiple risk factors and complex needs. These programs must take the long-term view in providing support. The support programs will also need long-term funding to provide for security and sustainability, including attracting and retaining good staff.

ACSSO recognises the role of the NDIS, however when looking at a framework that protects Australia's children, there is a need to provide additional support that assists children and young people with disability, and/or their parents/carers with disability in overcoming barriers to carrying out everyday activities. ACSSO believes these programs, when required, should facilitate engagement in social, political, and cultural activities and economic participation.

School can be an important source of stability for children with challenging family and home lives. There is a need to focus on schools as the basis for collaborations, simply because that is where the children are. This provides school personnel the opportunity to take the lead on developing collaborations. In addition, empowering the student by involving them, not only engages them in their own educational outcomes, but also tends to discourage them from absconding should they be placed in care.

ACSSO believes that EVERY child has the right to safety and security, both physical and mental as well as access to education and adequate nutrition. The successor to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children needs to identify services and strategies that work to provide necessary care for the child as well as prevent neglect and abuse, provide support for the child and their family and to protect the child from harm. In addition, the new framework needs to ensure that should a young person be placed in out of home care, the placement meets their needs and protects them from any further harm.