



Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

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Pre-Budget submission
to the
Department of Treasury on Priorities for
the 2024-25 Budget

Introduction

On behalf of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), we are presenting this pre-budget submission with a profound commitment to enhancing the quality and accessibility of education in our government schools. As the national peak body that is the voice for the interests of families and communities in government schools, ACSSO is uniquely positioned to provide insights and recommendations that will directly impact the educational outcomes of millions of Australian children.

In an era where education is more than just a pathway to opportunity but a cornerstone of our social fabric, the need for adequate, equitable, and forward-thinking funding for government schools cannot be overstated. Our submission is grounded in extensive research, consultation with stakeholders, and a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the Australian educational landscape.

We aim to outline a series of key investment areas that require immediate attention and funding from the Australian Government. These areas are critical to enhancing levels of educational quality and elevating our schools to new heights of excellence and inclusivity. Our nation's future prosperity is inextricably linked to the education we provide to our young people today. Thus, we feel this submission is not just a request for resources but the development of a blueprint for building a brighter, more equitable future for all Australians.

The following sections detail our recommendations and the rationale behind each. We firmly believe that with the government's support and collaboration, we can usher in an era of unprecedented educational success and opportunity.

National School Reform Agreement

ACSSO's 2024-2025 Budget Submission to the Federal Treasurer, focuses on education funding in Australia and the upcoming National School Reform Agreement. While the Agreement is currently promoted as a significant funding mechanism, it essentially only provides funding to a minimum standard rather than the aspirational 'gold standard' that ACSSO envisions for government schools across the nation.

The recent "Standing United" gathering at Parliament House, bringing together parents, teachers, and principals, was a powerful demonstration of the collective commitment to the future of public education in Australia. This unprecedented show of unity underscores the critical importance of fully funded public schools as educational institutions and as pillars of community and democracy. Teachers, the architects of learning; principals, the leaders of these educational havens; and parents, the first and continuing educators of their children, came together to voice a common concern: the

need for adequate, sustained funding to ensure that every child in Australia has access to a high-quality education. This event was not just a call for action but a poignant reminder to the government of our shared responsibility in nurturing the minds and futures of the next generation. As they stood united at the steps of Parliament House, these educators and caregivers sent a clear message about the value of public education and the urgent need for governmental support to uphold the standards and accessibility of these vital institutions.

This submission, therefore, underscores the urgent need for full and enhanced funding for government schools to ensure equitable access to exemplary education. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of family engagement in education and advocates for bolstered support and funding for ACSSO. To enable it to fulfil its role as the national voice for families, carers, and communities within government education. This document is a testament to ACSSO's commitment to bridging the gap between the minimum standards of the National School Reform Agreement and the envisioned gold standard of education for every Australian child. It lays a foundation for ACSSO's budget submission for 2024-2025, emphasising the need for full funding for government schools, improved family engagement, and increased support for ACSSO's role as a national voice in government education.

The recent review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap underscores a pressing need for the Australian government to significantly increase its investment in education, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This necessity goes beyond fulfilling statistical targets; it is about addressing Indigenous students' real and immediate needs, ensuring they have equitable access to quality education and opportunities that shape their futures. The National School Reform Agreement, as a key funding mechanism, must rise to this challenge by providing more than just the minimum standard.

A more inclusive and responsive education system is crucial. This requires acknowledging and leveraging Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations' unique insights and expertise in creating and delivering education programs. Increased funding will empower these organisations to effectively contribute to the educational landscape, ensuring programs are tailored to the specific needs of Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, the push in the Closing the Gap review to rethink mainstream educational systems and culture aligns with the need for a more profound and systemic transformation in how we educate Indigenous students. This transformation demands substantial resources to ensure educational strategies are not just superficial changes but deeply responsive to Indigenous communities' aspirations and needs.

Additionally, the establishment of stronger accountability mechanisms, as recommended, calls for a substantial investment. Robust, independent oversight is essential to monitor and ensure the effectiveness of educational programs and policies. This accountability extends to embedding these obligations in significant intergovernmental agreements, further underlining the need for increased funding.

The National School Reform Agreement must reflect a sense of urgency and a commitment to substantial change as outlined in the recent Closing the Gap review. It's about investing not only in the educational outcomes of today but also in the long-term future and well-being of Indigenous communities. *This investment is an investment in the nation's future.* Failing to adequately fund these initiatives risks perpetuating the educational gap, undermining the overarching goals of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Therefore, it is imperative that the government commits to

funding that exceeds the minimum standard to genuinely close the educational gap for Indigenous Australians.

Student Well-being

ACSSO believes in a comprehensive, whole-school approach to student well-being that emphasises the integration of both teachers and parents. This approach recognises that student well-being is not only the responsibility of individual students or educators but is a collective effort that involves the entire school community, including families.

The well-being of students is intrinsically linked to their academic achievement, behaviour, social integration, and overall satisfaction. Therefore, a focus on well-being enhances the capacity of teachers to connect with students, effectively convey ideas, address challenges, and prevent burnout. Moreover, promoting children's and young people's well-being is critical for ensuring their safety, aiding their development, and securing positive outcomes in adulthood.

ACSSO calls for a strategy that encompasses the entire school ecosystem, recognising that well-being has multiple dimensions. This approach requires the involvement of both teachers and parents, fostering a supportive environment that caters to the diverse needs of all students.

A key aspect of this approach is the development of a well-being check-in tool, which serves as an important means of data collection. It allows schools to work in partnership with parents to address students' readiness to learn. This proactive measure helps identify and address well-being issues before they escalate.

ACSSO recommends implementing policies aimed at reducing student anxiety around assessments. This could include the introduction of less stressful forms of evaluation, such as formative assessment and peer assessment. Involving students in identifying their own assessment needs would also alleviate stress and promote a more holistic and accurate understanding of student learning and progress.

The Family Engagement Circle, established by ACSSO, underscores the need for a paradigm shift in viewing families as collaborators in developing solutions. This perspective is integral to the whole-school approach to student well-being.

ACSSO's call for a whole-school approach to student well-being, backed by the development of specific tools and policies, reflects its commitment to creating an educational environment where every student's well-being is a priority. By integrating the efforts of teachers, parents, and the wider school community, ACSSO aims to foster an environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Technological Capacity in Schools

ACSSO has previously reported on technological capacity in schools that highlights the digital divide issue, with a specific focus on economically disadvantaged and vulnerable students. This divide has become increasingly apparent in today's education system, where technology plays a crucial role.

The digital divide refers to the gap between those who have easy access to the internet and computers and those who do not. This divide has significant implications for education, as students without access to technology are at a disadvantage in terms of learning opportunities and access to educational resources. ACSSO advocates for a digital equity audit in government schools to assess students' current state of technological access and usage. This audit is essential to identify gaps in

access to ICT equipment and internet connectivity, especially for vulnerable and economically disadvantaged students.

Alongside the audit, ACSSO calls for significant investment in ICT equipment and internet access. This investment is vital to ensure that all students, regardless of their economic background, have equal opportunities to benefit from digital learning tools and resources. Equipping schools with the necessary technology and ensuring that all students have access to it is not just about keeping up with digital trends. It's about creating an even playing field for education and enhancing educational outcomes, preparing students for a world that is increasingly reliant on digital technologies.

This focus on technology is particularly important for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged students at the highest risk of being left behind in the digital divide. Ensuring they have access to technology is a step towards offering them the same educational opportunities as their peers. ACSSO's call for a digital equity audit and investment in ICT equipment and internet access is a recognition of the evolving nature of education and the need to adapt to a world where technology is integral to learning. By addressing the digital divide, ACSSO aims to ensure that all students have the tools and resources they need to succeed in their education, especially those who are economically disadvantaged or vulnerable.

School Psychologists and Allied Health Professionals

ACSSO believes it is essential to include Allied Health Professionals, along with school psychologists, nurses, Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists and dentists, as part of the Community Hub in the education system. This approach recognises and addresses the diverse needs of children and teenagers, particularly in the field of mental health.

The inclusion of Nurses, Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists and Dentists as part of the Allied Health Professionals in the school environment can provide crucial health services. This can range from basic health checks and dental care to early identification of health issues, which can significantly impact a student's learning and overall well-being.

School Psychologists play a central role in this framework. With their specialised training in education and psychology, they are adept at addressing students' mental health, learning, and behavioural needs. Their role extends beyond just counselling to include assessments, interventions, and collaboration with teachers and families.

The Community Hub Concept involves creating a network of support that extends beyond the school. Allied Health Professionals can work in tandem with community resources to provide a more comprehensive support system. This system can address not only academic needs but also students' social, emotional, and physical health needs. Integrating services like psychological counselling, health checks, and wellness programs into the school setting makes the community hub a focal point for holistic student support.

The Community Hub provides a friendly and welcoming environment for families to gather and connect. It can serve as a less intimidating venue for playgroups, parent groups, support groups, and other similar gatherings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the alarming rise in mental health issues among children and adolescents, calling for an effective response. School psychologists are pivotal in this regard, offering targeted interventions and support. ACSSO's advocacy for a minimum ratio of one school psychologist per 500 students is, we believe, a step towards ensuring that mental health concerns are addressed promptly and managed effectively within the school setting.

Establishing national standards in school-based psychological services is crucial. It ensures that the quality and safety of services are maintained across all educational institutions. These standards should define qualifications for providers and set clear expectations for the services offered, ensuring consistency and effectiveness in addressing student needs.

Improved access to school-based psychological services and the integration of Allied Health Professionals will foster an educational environment that supports students' academic, emotional, and mental well-being. ACSSO believes this is a necessary shift in educational philosophy that recognises the intertwined nature of mental health, physical well-being, and academic success.

Family Engagement Circle

As conceptualised and advocated by ACSSO, the Family Engagement Circle is a vital professional development tool and workshop designed to strengthen family engagement practices in schools and educational settings. Grounded in the research and methodologies of esteemed academics such as Dr Karen Mapp, Dr Deb Pushor, Dr Joyce Epstein, and Simon Sinek, as well as the principles outlined in the Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework (2008 & 2017) and national family participation work, the Family Engagement Circle represents a comprehensive approach to enhancing educational experiences.

Decades of research have consistently shown that regular involvement of families in educational and community development activities leads to significantly improved outcomes for individuals and their families. This involvement enhances family relationships and contributes to overall family well-being. Children and teenagers whose families are engaged in their learning and development demonstrate greater academic gains, higher graduation rates, and increased motivation, confidence, and ambition. These benefits are observed regardless of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, or educational background.

A high degree of trust between families and school staff is essential for successful family engagement activities. Families are more likely to engage when they feel informed about a program, feel accepted and appreciated, are linked to other families and professionals, and are given opportunities to lead. This engagement transforms them into active supporters and advocates for educational initiatives.

In an era where student well-being is increasingly recognised as a key driver for their readiness to learn, strong connections between home and school are more important than ever. The Family Engagement Circle, which was established by ACSSO in 2017, represents an ongoing effort that necessitates a paradigm shift from viewing families as part of the problem to seeing them as collaborators in developing solutions.

ACSSO's proposal to the government includes two key requests to further this endeavour:

- To approve and support reviewing and updating the Family Engagement Circle resources.
- Secondly, to finance and assess a pilot program using the redesigned Family Engagement Circle's resources. These steps are crucial for ensuring that the tool remains relevant and effective in today's rapidly evolving educational landscape.

The implementation and continuous improvement of the Family Engagement Circle align with ACSSO's commitment to fostering a more inclusive, collaborative, and effective educational environment. By empowering and, more to the point, allowing families to participate actively in their child's school education and ongoing development, ACSSO aims to create a more holistic and nurturing experience for all students across Australia.

Our recent project highlighted the importance of Family-School partnerships. Families, and the importance of working together with the school has slipped totally off the radar. Our conversations with families revealed that they feel more isolated and not heard when it comes to their child. Physical school barriers, as well as implied barriers, have led to the undermining of these relationships, which have been proven by research to improve student achievement, promote a positive school culture and reduce critical incidents.

Through our pilot program, we noticed a significant demand for continual professional learning for educators and other school staff. Unfortunately, the current funding conditions have made it difficult for schools to prioritise family engagement, which is often viewed as an "add-on" to their workload due to a lack of time, resources, and understanding. This, in turn, can exacerbate challenges that arise and create further complications.

Discuss Display Do Initiative

As we propose, reviving the Discuss Display Do Initiative comes at a critical time, considering the noted decline in volunteer numbers across Australia. This decline in volunteering can have far-reaching implications, particularly in the realm of community-building and capacity development. The Discuss Display Do Initiative offers a unique and impactful solution to this challenge.

Initially funded by DEEWR, the initiative effectively bridged the gap between informal learning through school volunteering and formal recognition of these skills. By linking volunteer experiences to certifications or modules within certificates and diplomas, the initiative provided tangible value to the volunteer efforts of parents and caregivers. This acknowledged their contribution to the school community and empowered them with recognised qualifications that could be leveraged for further education or career advancement.

This initiative holds particular significance in regions with lower income levels, where educational and professional opportunities may be more limited. It demonstrates the value of lifelong learning and provides a pathway for personal and professional development, which can be particularly motivating. The fact that these awards were often presented in front of their children also serves as a powerful tool in fostering a culture of education and ambition within families and communities.

Given the current decline in volunteer numbers, revisiting and updating the Discuss Display Do Initiative could boost volunteer engagement. The decline in volunteering can be attributed to various factors, including time constraints, lack of awareness of opportunities, and perhaps a perceived lack of tangible benefits from volunteering. By providing formal recognition and potential career advancement opportunities through this initiative, ACSSO can address these concerns and incentivise volunteering.

ACSSO requests the federal government to support reviewing and updating the Discuss Display Do project and evaluating a pilot program using the updated resources. This proposal would revive a proven successful initiative and align with current needs and context. Parents could gain recognised qualifications for their volunteer efforts, benefiting the school community and enhancing their personal and professional development.

The proposal to review and update the Discuss Display Do project is timely and necessary. It revives a proven successful initiative and aligns it with the current needs and context. The potential benefits are manifold: parents and caregivers gain recognised qualifications for their volunteer efforts, enhancing both the school community and their personal and professional development.

Furthermore, this initiative is an excellent example of community engagement and capacity building. It benefits the volunteers by acknowledging their skills and contributions and the broader school community by fostering a supportive and engaged environment. In a broader sense, it aligns with ACSSO's goals of enhancing family engagement in education and recognising the invaluable contributions of parents and caregivers.

Backing the Discuss Display Do Initiative can be a strategic move for Australia in the face of declining volunteer numbers. This program offers a practical and meaningful way to boost community involvement, recognise and develop skills, and ultimately strengthen the educational ecosystem. The federal government's support in reviewing and updating this initiative would be a significant step towards revitalising volunteerism and community capacity building in Australia.

Policy Advice

ACSSO plays a crucial role in providing policy advice to the government for the interests and rights of over 2.55 million children attending government schools across Australia. This policy advice extends beyond mere representation of views; it encompasses building collaborative relationships at all levels and ensuring that the knowledge and perspectives of all parties are valued and incorporated into the educational system. ACSSO's efforts in offering policy advice are essential for creating a more inclusive, responsive, and effective education system.

However, ACSSO's capacity for effective policy advice and delivering vital information to the government has been significantly constrained due to a lack of financial increases over the past 12 years. This stagnation in funding, amidst rising inflation and increased costs of delivering government services, has hampered ACSSO's ability to sustain the staffing and resources necessary for impactful policy advice and engagement. The organisation's ability to conduct research, gather data, engage with communities, and effectively represent their interests at the national level has been limited. Enhanced resources for ACSSO are crucial for several reasons:

- ACSSO's unique position allows it to gather and present data that reflects the actual experiences and needs of students, parents, and educators in government schools. This firsthand information is invaluable for policymakers who may not have direct exposure to these day-to-day educational environments.
- By providing empirical data and informed insights, ACSSO supports the development of evidence-based policies. This approach ensures that decisions are not just based on theoretical models but are grounded in the realities of the educational landscape.
- ACSSO's role is essential in bridging the gap between policy formulation and its practical implementation. By voicing the concerns and feedback from the grassroots level, ACSSO ensures that policies are not only designed well but are also implementable and effective in real-world scenarios.
- ACSSO's provision of policy advice plays a crucial role in promoting equitable education. By highlighting the specific needs of diverse student populations, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, ACSSO works to ensure that policies are inclusive and cater to all segments of the student population. This focus on providing comprehensive and informed policy advice ensures that the diverse needs of students are effectively communicated and considered in the formation of educational policies.
- In a rapidly changing educational landscape, ACSSO's insights help in making policies more responsive and adaptable. By providing current and relevant data, ACSSO enables policymakers to address emerging educational challenges and opportunities quickly.

Diversity in policymaking

Encouraging diversity in policymaking is a crucial part of ACSSO's work to promote inclusivity and equity in education. This is necessary for several reasons:

- it reflects the multifaceted nature of Australian society. ACSSO ensures that the voices of families from diverse backgrounds, including those who are economically disadvantaged, come from various cultural backgrounds, or have different educational needs, are represented in the policy-making process.
- it enhances educational equity by advocating for the needs of all segments of the student population. ACSSO plays a critical role in addressing disparities and ensuring that all students have access to quality education, regardless of their background.
- representing diverse voices helps create an education system where students and families feel valued and included. This sense of belonging is crucial for students' social and emotional well-being.
- policies shaped by a broad range of perspectives are more likely to be relevant, effective, and responsive to the actual needs of the school community. This inclusive approach ensures that educational reforms and initiatives are grounded in the realities of those they are meant to serve.
- ACSSO's support encourages active community engagement in education. Families and communities are more likely to support and engage with the education system when they are involved in the policy-making process.

Addressing Emerging Issues

ACSSO has a unique advantage in identifying issues that arise in the education sector at a rapid pace due to its close relationships with schools, families, and communities. This allows for timely interventions and policy adjustments. ACSSO's ability to provide policymakers with up-to-date information and insights is crucial in making informed decisions that reflect current educational contexts, particularly in rapidly evolving situations such as the shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. ACSSO's input allows for a more adaptable and responsive education policy that can better address new challenges, whether technological advancements, societal needs shifts, or unexpected crises. ACSSO serves as a voice for the urgency of certain issues that policymakers may not immediately recognise, such as highlighting the digital divide during remote learning periods and advocating for resources to address it. ACSSO brings emerging issues to light, fostering a collaborative approach to solution development that involves various stakeholders, including educators, parents, and government bodies.

Monitoring and Feedback

ACSSO's monitoring and feedback duties are crucial to its advocacy efforts. They ensure that educational policies and initiatives are meeting their intended objectives. This function is key for several reasons.

- by conducting monitoring activities, ACSSO can determine whether educational policies and programs are effectively addressing the needs of students, families, and schools. This helps identify where policies are succeeding and areas that require improvement or adjustment.
- ACSSO's feedback is invaluable for policymakers and educational authorities. It is more than just pointing out what is not working; it also involves making practical suggestions based on real-world insights to enhance policies and practices.

- continuous monitoring and feedback create a loop of improvement in the education system. By regularly evaluating the impact of policies and providing feedback, ACSSO helps refine and evolve educational strategies to better serve students' needs.
- ACSSO's monitoring role promotes accountability in the implementation of policies. This is crucial for maintaining the trust of families and communities in the education system and ensuring that resources are used effectively.
- ACSSO's monitoring role helps highlight unseen challenges or issues that may not be immediately apparent at the policy level. Thus ensuring that they are addressed in a timely manner.

Current resource limitations significantly hamper the effectiveness of ACSSO in its multifaceted role. ACSSO's capability to conduct comprehensive research, gather detailed data, and engage effectively with various stakeholders is critically restricted without sufficient funding. Increased financial support for ACSSO is not merely an investment in the organisation itself. Still, it significantly contributes to the broader goal of creating an education system in Australia that is more informed, responsive, and equitable.

Enhanced resources would enable ACSSO to expand its reach and depth in providing critical insights to policymakers, playing a pivotal role in shaping the future of education in Australia. This expansion is essential for representing the diverse voices within the community effectively. More resources would allow ACSSO to engage more deeply with a broader range of communities, conduct outreach and consultation activities, and ensure that Australian families' diverse needs and perspectives are adequately represented and addressed in educational policies and reforms. Such an investment is crucial for building Australia's more inclusive, equitable, and effective education system.

Furthermore, ACSSO's ability to promptly and effectively identify and articulate emerging issues in education is significantly limited by its current funding constraints. Increased financial support would bolster ACSSO's research, data collection, and communication capabilities, benefiting the immediate needs of the education sector and contributing to the long-term development of more resilient and adaptive educational policies and practices in Australia.

Additionally, the effectiveness of ACSSO's monitoring and feedback role is heavily dependent on its resources. With limited funding, the scope of its monitoring activities is restricted. Increased funding would enable ACSSO to conduct more comprehensive monitoring, gather more detailed feedback, and engage more effectively with a wider range of stakeholders. This enhanced capacity would significantly contribute to the development of a more responsive, effective, and accountable education system in Australia.

Therefore, increased funding is urgently needed to enable ACSSO to maintain and enhance its efforts to reach families, particularly those families we have not reached as yet, and advise the government of current trends, gaps and expectations. This investment would strengthen ACSSO's capacity to inform educational policies and practices and ensure that the voices of families, students, and communities are effectively represented and heard in critical discussions and decisions affecting government schooling in Australia. Enhanced resources would empower ACSSO to continue its essential work in helping shape an education system that is equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all Australian children.