

Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024

Submission – October 2024

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Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

Background

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Australian Parliament Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment's Inquiry into Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024 (Inquiry / Bill).

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY2023, SSI supported over 56,000 clients across more than 59 programs and community-based services. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities considered by many to be 'hard to reach'.

SSI is well placed to provide input to this Inquiry as it brings experience of working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, children and families including people with disability. We are available to be called upon to elaborate further on how schools can be better funded and reformed to lift education outcomes, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds.

Recommendation

SSI urges the Inquiry to make the following recommendation with respect to the Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024:

At a minimum, the Bill needs to have the Schools Resourcing Standard (SRS) reflect the gap between the Australian Government's offer to states of 22.5% and the full 25%. That is, the Bill must set a floor of the Australian Government's share of the SRS at 25%.

Prior to starting school, children and young people that are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are culturally and linguistically diverse have needs that arise from the early years

SSI's experience is reflected in its work across a broad range of the Australian community. SSI works with families, children and young people through its programs and initiatives such as:

- The Humanitarian Settlement Program working to support refugee settlement.
- Community Hubs bring local education, health, community, and settlement services together in a familiar and welcoming environment to make it easier for families with young children to access the services and assistance they need. These eight Hubs in New South Wales (NSW), that span Blacktown, Parramatta, Cumberland and Coffs Harbour and ten Hubs in Queensland that include Logan and Ipswich, offer activities tailored to match the needs of the community, including early childhood support and education, English classes and vocational pathways.
- The Multicultural Foster Care Program that connects children from diverse backgrounds with foster carers who can help them maintain their connection to culture, religion, and language.
- Being a National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) partner, delivering Local Area Coordination services to support people with disability, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people with disability, navigate their goals, connect to supports in their local area and access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

SSI plays one role in the ecosystem that surrounds children and families. Within that ecosystem, schools and education provide all children and young people, regardless of their background, with the knowledge, skills and personal qualities to positively contribute to their communities and Australia more broadly. Schools concurrently play an important role in supporting the acculturation and settlement of children and young people from CALD backgrounds who are newcomers¹ and by extension, their families.

The Productivity Commission's final Inquiry Report into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) recently highlighted the importance of supporting inclusion in the ECEC/Early Years system.² SSI's own work with communities across Australia finds that children from CALD

backgrounds are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable when starting school and less likely to access early childhood education. Our [Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II](#) research conducted jointly with researchers at Education Futures, University of South Australia, also aligns with the Productivity Commission's findings, particularly on its observations on developmental vulnerability. While the Australian Government is yet to provide a response, adopting the Productivity Commission Inquiry report's recommendations would be a big step towards levelling the playing field for all children, particularly in reducing developmental disparities among CALD children, better positioning them for their school years.

Socio-economic disadvantage is a large driver of developmental vulnerability for all children. This plays a huge role in shaping the developmental outcomes of children from CALD communities as they disproportionately experience socio-economic disadvantage, according to Stronger Starts. Almost a third of children from CALD backgrounds living in the most disadvantaged socio-economic areas were developmentally vulnerable compared to 1 in 6 of their peers living in the most advantaged areas.³ Public schools in those areas are subject to the current Commonwealth, state and territory school funding arrangements.

Strengthening needs-based funding will help children and young people who are culturally and linguistically diverse and from low socioeconomic backgrounds as they are more likely to attend public schools

While the Productivity Commission has made welcome specific recommendations to address both financial and non-financial barriers to participation for CALD children, and to invest in programs that enhance cultural safety and responsiveness in services, potentially through the use of bilingual and bicultural educators, school funding arrangements, particularly as they apply to government (public) schools, must similarly undergo better funding and reform. These children represent the future students that will attend these same schools, bringing specific inclusion needs. Students from CALD and low socio-economic backgrounds are more represented in public schools compared to non-government schools. For example, as of March 2022 in NSW, a state with one of the largest populations of people from CALD backgrounds, had almost two-thirds or half a million (62.3%, 498,430) students enrolled in NSW government schools from homes where English was the only language spoken. More than a third, or over a quarter of a million (37.7%, 302,154) students came from homes where languages other than English were spoken by either the students themselves and/or at least one parent or carer.⁴

These demographic 'facts on the ground' informs SSI's view that although the Better and Fairer Schools (Funding and Reform) Bill 2024 (Bill) makes a start to address the needed reform and funding to public schools that have unmet need, its proposal to lock in a floor of only 20% is insufficient to respond to the needs of public schools, let alone those of the greater number of children and families from low socioeconomic areas and are culturally linguistically diverse who attend them. This low 20% floor can be reverted to by future governments, resulting in funding cuts to schools. Such a 'floor' must be set higher to even start to meet the foundational needs of schools and students. At a minimum, the Bill needs to reflect the gap between the Australian Government's offer to the states of 22.5% and the full 25% - such a change is worth an additional \$1,000 per student which is a significant difference to meeting the unmet needs of

students and staff. At a minimum, the Bill must set a floor of the Australian Government's share of the SRS at 25%.

Naturally, schools are best placed to assess and respond to their varied local needs, provided they have the resources and funding to do so. While schools are likely to determine the specialised resources, programs and supports required to meet the needs of students from CALD and low socioeconomic backgrounds, being able to better fund overdue rectifications and improvements at the school-wide level would benefit all students, including those from the aforementioned priority populations.

It is essential that our recommendation is adopted so that the Bill can deliver reform that translates into meaningful improvements to public schools that will not only benefit all students' education, developmental and wellbeing needs, but especially those from priority populations the most. Providing equitable, much needed funding to public schools strengthens their position in the ecosystem to continue to serve their students while working with the community sector in the interest of children, young people and families.

Authorised by: Sandy Fitter, Group Head, Stakeholder Relations, Research and Policy

Contact: Tri Nguyen, Social Policy Lead,

Date: 22 October 2024

¹ Khawaja, N., Allan, E., & Schweitzer, R. D. (2017). The role of School Connectedness and Social Support in the Acculturation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Youth in Australia. *Australian Psychologist*. 53 (1). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320375692_The_Role_of_School_Connectedness_and_Social_Support_in_the_Acculturation_in_Culturally_and_Linguistically_Diverse_Youth_in_Australia_Acculturation_in_CALD_youth/link/59f9a4850f7e9b553ec0e848/download?tp

² Productivity Commission. (2024). *A path to universal early childhood education and care: Inquiry Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report>

³ Lam, B., McMahon, T., Beauchamp, T., Badu, E. & Brinkman, S. (2024). Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia. Education Futures University of South Australia. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25954/r0n2-se65>

⁴ NSW Department of Education. (2022). *Schools: Language diversity in NSW, 2022*. Retrieved from <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/cese/publications/statistics/language-diversity-bulletin/language-diversity-bulletin-2022>