

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into the Factors Driving Educational Attainment

Submitted by:
Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

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Introduction

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment. Despite decades of reform, attainment gaps are widening, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage, and current approaches are not addressing the underlying causes.

As the national voice of primary school leaders, APPA represents principals working in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. Primary school leaders witness daily the factors that support and hinder educational attainment and are uniquely positioned at the intersection of education, health, wellbeing, family circumstances and community services.

Educational attainment has a profound impact on individuals, communities and Australia's future prosperity. However, attainment is not solely determined by what occurs within school gates. It is shaped by a complex interaction of educational, social, economic, developmental and health factors that begin long before a child enters a classroom.

APPA's central argument is that meaningful improvement in educational attainment will only occur when Australia adopts a whole-of-government approach that addresses both educational factors and the social determinants that influence children's capacity to learn.

About the Australian Primary Principals Association

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is the national professional association representing primary school leaders across Australia.

APPA advocates for more than 7,600 primary school principals and school leaders working in government, Catholic and independent schools in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities. Through collaboration with governments, education authorities, researchers and community organisations, APPA works to strengthen primary education and improve outcomes for Australia's children and young people.

APPA's advocacy is informed by the lived experience and professional expertise of school leaders who work daily with children, families and communities. The Association has a long-standing commitment to advancing educational equity, student wellbeing, leadership development and evidence-informed policy.

As the national voice of primary school leadership, APPA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment and to share the perspectives of school leaders on the opportunities and challenges facing Australian learners.

Educational Attainment and the Social Determinants of Education

National assessment data consistently demonstrates that educational attainment is not distributed equally across the Australian population. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students living in regional, rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students facing multiple forms of disadvantage continue to experience lower levels of educational attainment than their peers.

APPA has long argued that schools alone cannot close these gaps. Poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, limited access to health services, family wellbeing, and early childhood experiences significantly influence children's readiness and capacity to engage successfully in learning.

Increasingly, schools are responding to challenges that extend beyond their traditional educational role. Primary school leaders report growing expectations to support students experiencing hunger, anxiety, trauma, family instability, developmental delays and unmet health needs. These conditions increase cognitive load, reduce learning readiness and directly limit children's capacity to engage with curriculum.

While schools willingly support children and families, educational attainment will not improve substantially unless the broader conditions that shape children's lives are also addressed.

Understanding the Decline in Boys' Educational Attainment Primary school leaders observe clear patterns contributing to boys' declining attainment that extend beyond academic skill. Boys are more likely to enter school with developmental vulnerabilities in language, emotional regulation and social competence, which can compound over time if not addressed early. Principals also report that boys often mask anxiety through behaviour, disengage quickly when they feel incompetent, and respond strongly to relational disconnection with teachers. These developmental and relational factors interact with broader social influences, including online content, identity pressures and reduced opportunities for purposeful movement and hands-on learning. Recognising these patterns is essential for designing responses that improve outcomes for boys without diminishing the needs of girls.

The Importance of the Early Years

Educational attainment begins long before children arrive at school.

Through APPA's Thrive by Five initiative, undertaken since 2016, primary school leaders have worked to build a common understanding across school communities about the importance of the first 2,000 days of life. This work recognises that children's language development, emotional regulation, social competence and wellbeing during the early years profoundly influence later educational outcomes.

Recent Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) results reinforce this message. The 2024 AEDC found that developmental vulnerability increased across all five developmental domains when compared with 2021 results. Nationally, the proportion of children assessed as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains increased from 22.0 per cent in 2021 to 23.5 per cent in 2024. Vulnerability on two or more domains increased from 11.4 per cent to 12.5 per cent, representing the highest level recorded since the AEDC commenced. Developmental vulnerability at school entry is one of the strongest predictors of later academic attainment, attendance and engagement.



Particularly concerning was the increase in vulnerability relating to emotional maturity, social competence and physical health and wellbeing. Approximately one in four Australian children now commence school developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain.

Developmental vulnerability is not distributed evenly. Children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are significantly more likely to commence school behind their peers.

These findings highlight the importance of investment in early intervention, family support, maternal and child health services, quality early childhood education and care, and initiatives that strengthen parenting confidence and capability.

APPA welcomes the intent of the Thriving Kids initiative and is optimistic that it can support vulnerable children and families to access the interventions and services necessary for children to arrive at school healthy, supported and ready to learn.

Student Wellbeing as a Foundation for Learning

Educational attainment cannot be separated from student wellbeing.

Primary school leaders consistently report increasing complexity within classrooms. Student learning is frequently impacted by poverty, food insecurity, anxiety, poor self-regulation, developmental vulnerability and untreated health concerns.

Schools are increasingly facilitating vision, hearing and dental checks for children who did not access, or had access, to early health screening programs. Principals report that significant time is now spent managing consent forms, distributing reports, coordinating appointments and supporting families to access services. These activities represent a growing administrative burden that is largely unfunded and diverts attention from teaching and learning. Every hour principals spend coordinating health services is an hour diverted from instructional leadership, teacher development and school improvement.

The AEDC findings further demonstrate the growing wellbeing challenges facing children, with record levels of vulnerability identified in emotional maturity and social competence.

APPA believes that educational attainment improves when children arrive at school healthy, regulated, nourished and ready to learn. While schools have an important role to play, responsibility for addressing health and wellbeing needs must remain shared across education, health and social service systems.

The question must be asked: just because schools are present in every community, should they become responsible for every community challenge?

In addition, APPA is increasingly concerned about the wellbeing challenges affecting both boys and girls. School leaders report rising levels of anxiety among young people, increasing exposure to harmful online content and growing concerns about the influence of social media on self-image, relationships and belonging. These factors can influence engagement, attendance and educational attainment and should be considered as part of any national strategy to improve outcomes.

Wellbeing, Behaviour and Engagement Patterns for Boys School leaders consistently report that boys are disproportionately represented in behavioural incidents, suspensions and disengagement from learning. These behaviours often reflect underlying wellbeing challenges rather than defiance. When boys experience



relational rupture, repeated failure, or limited opportunities for agency and movement, they are more likely to withdraw, act out or disconnect from learning. Addressing boys' wellbeing requires approaches that strengthen emotional regulation, build relational trust, and create learning environments where boys experience competence, purpose and belonging.

Belonging, Engagement and Student Agency

Educational attainment is deeply connected to students' sense of belonging.

International evidence demonstrates that students who feel connected to their school are more likely to engage in learning, persist when faced with challenge and achieve positive outcomes. Conversely, declining belonging can become a barrier to educational success.

The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings indicate that Australian students' sense of belonging has declined over time. This is concerning because belonging is closely linked to cultural safety, psychological safety, wellbeing and engagement.

As neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang reminds us, "First we feel, and then we learn."

Schools that create strong cultures of belonging establish the conditions necessary for learning. For many children, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, belonging is inseparable from cultural safety and identity.

Student agency is equally important. Children are more engaged when they have opportunities to contribute to decisions about their learning, exercise choice, pursue questions that matter to them and develop stewardship of their learning environments.

Educational attainment should not be viewed solely through the lens of learning deficits or gaps yet to be closed. Equally important is ensuring that students have opportunities to identify and build upon their strengths, interests and capabilities, fostering confidence, engagement and a positive sense of themselves as learners.

Joy and Fun in Learning

APPA's work on joy and fun in learning highlights the important role positive emotional engagement plays in educational success.

Joy, curiosity, playfulness and challenge are not distractions from learning; they are powerful drivers of learning. Students who experience success, connection, enjoyment and purpose are more likely to engage deeply with learning and persist through difficulty.

Educational attainment should therefore be understood not only as academic achievement, but also as the development of confident, capable learners who retain a love of learning throughout life.

A Curriculum of Engagement

APPA challenges the notion that educational attainment can be improved through a narrow "back to basics" approach alone.



While literacy and numeracy remain fundamental, young people require access to the full breadth of the Australian Curriculum and opportunities to develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication and problem-solving capabilities.

Educational attainment improves when students encounter a curriculum that engages them intellectually, emotionally and socially.

APPA believes teachers should be trusted as rational professional agents who make informed decisions based on the needs, interests and strengths of the students in their classrooms and communities.

Effective pedagogy is a critical factor in educational attainment. Teachers draw on professional knowledge, evidence-informed practice and practice informed evidence, assessment data and their understanding of individual learners to make decisions about the teaching approaches most likely to engage students and support progress. There is no single pedagogical approach that is effective for every learner, every context or every stage of development.

APPA supports teachers exercising professional judgement to adapt curriculum, instruction and learning experiences in ways that respond to the diverse needs of students and communities. Educational attainment is strengthened when teachers are trusted to make informed decisions about how best to engage learners, while remaining accountable for student growth and achievement.

Gender and Educational Attainment

Educational attainment data demonstrates differences in outcomes between boys and girls across a range of measures. Australian and international assessments have consistently found that girls outperform boys in reading and literacy, while boys often perform comparatively better in some aspects of mathematics. Boys are also more likely to experience disciplinary action, disengagement from schooling and lower levels of educational attainment at the completion of secondary education.

However, APPA cautions against simplistic interpretations of gender differences. Educational attainment is influenced by a complex interplay of social, cultural, developmental and economic factors. Gender alone does not determine educational success, and significant variation exists within groups of boys and girls.

Primary school leaders observe that many boys benefit from learning environments that incorporate movement, collaboration, hands-on learning, problem-solving and opportunities for agency and purpose. Equally, girls benefit from educational environments that challenge stereotypes, foster confidence and provide opportunities for leadership, creativity and participation across all curriculum areas, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

APPA believes the focus should not be on creating educational approaches for one gender at the expense of another, but rather on ensuring schools provide diverse and engaging learning experiences that meet the needs of all learners.

A strengths-based approach that values belonging, wellbeing, engagement, positive relationships and student agency is likely to benefit all students while helping address gender-related differences in educational outcomes.



The question is not whether boys or girls are succeeding. The question is whether every child experiences belonging, engagement, challenge and support. Educational attainment improves when schools create environments in which all learners can thrive.

Teacher Workforce Challenges

The national teacher workforce shortage is a significant factor influencing educational attainment.

Evidence from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) found that 41.9 per cent of Australian principals reported teacher shortages as hindering the quality of instruction in their schools, almost double the OECD average of 23.1 per cent. In disadvantaged schools, this figure rises to approximately 66.9 per cent.

The impacts are felt most acutely in low socio-economic communities and rural and remote Australia.

Workforce shortages affect educational attainment in multiple ways:

- Early career teachers may have fewer opportunities to learn from experienced colleagues.
- Hard-to-staff schools often have higher proportions of beginning teachers but fewer experienced mentors.
- Temporary staffing arrangements can undermine continuity and relationship-building.
- Unfilled relief teacher positions increase workload pressures across schools.
- School leaders are frequently diverted from instructional leadership responsibilities to supervise classes.
- Leadership and administrative work is increasingly completed outside normal working hours.

These impacts are cumulative and disproportionately affect schools already facing significant educational challenges.

APPA believes targeted workforce strategies for rural, remote and disadvantaged communities must remain a national priority. Greater access to mentoring, including innovative tele-mentoring models, should be explored to support teacher development and retention.

Workload and Compliance Pressures

Teachers and school leaders consistently report that compliance and administrative requirements are consuming increasing amounts of time. Reducing administrative burden and stabilising the workforce would immediately increase the time available for high-impact teaching and leadership.

Risk assessments, reporting obligations, documentation requirements and other compliance activities have steadily expanded. While accountability remains important, these requirements often reduce the time available for planning, teaching, assessment and relationship-building.

Educational attainment is strengthened when educators have sufficient time to focus on teaching and learning.



Reducing unnecessary administrative burden represents a practical and cost-effective strategy for improving educational outcomes.

Supporting Students with Disability

Schools have a clear responsibility to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. Primary school leaders and teachers work within the Disability Standards for Education and are committed to creating inclusive learning environments that recognise the strengths, needs and aspirations of every learner.

Students with disability are supported through adjustments, differentiated teaching practices and individual planning processes designed to enable participation, engagement and progress. In partnership with parents and carers, schools regularly develop, monitor and review individual learning goals to ensure that students are supported at their point of need and that progress is celebrated and sustained.

These responsibilities are fundamental to the work of schools and reflect a commitment to both equity and excellence. However, increasing complexity in student needs, combined with workforce pressures and growing administrative demands, means that schools require adequate resourcing and access to specialist expertise to continue delivering high-quality inclusive education.

APPA strongly values the positive impact that the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) can provide for children and families, however, school leaders continue to raise concerns regarding the delivery of therapy services during instructional time. Students should not be required to choose between participation in learning and participation in intervention.

Children deserve access to both.

APPA also notes that when family members are unable to participate directly in therapy sessions, school staff frequently become intermediaries between therapists and families. While undertaken with goodwill, this can reduce opportunities to build family capability and increase workload for educators.

Future reforms should strengthen coordination between education and disability systems while ensuring students can fully access both educational and therapeutic support.

Learning Environments Matter

Educational attainment is influenced by the environments in which students learn.

Schools require facilities that support collaboration, creativity, quiet reflection, independent learning, movement and active engagement.

APPA encourages learning environments that accommodate diverse learning needs and recognise that productive learning can involve discussion, movement, experimentation and creativity.

Orderly learning environments are not necessarily silent environments.

Students learn best when spaces are fit for purpose, flexible and responsive to contemporary approaches to teaching and learning.



Whole-of-Government Responses

Primary school leaders increasingly observe that educational challenges rarely occur in isolation.

Attendance, engagement and achievement are often influenced by factors such as housing stability, food security, access to healthcare, transport, community safety and family wellbeing.

APPA believes a whole-of-government approach is essential. Data and policy responses across education, health, housing, disability, child development and social services should be aligned to identify need early and target support effectively.

Schools should not be expected to solve every social problem simply because they are trusted institutions within communities. Additionally, when schools are expected to compensate for gaps in health, housing and social services, educational outcomes inevitably suffer.

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement provides optimism that schools will be better equipped to address educational disadvantage. However, teacher and leader time should remain focused on educational responsibilities, while specialist health and social services retain responsibility for delivering health and wellbeing interventions.

The Importance of Understanding the Problem

APPA encourages policymakers to engage deeply with the underlying causes of educational disadvantage.

Drawing on the work of policy scholar Dr Carol Bacchi, we encourage governments to examine carefully how problems are framed before developing solutions.

For example, if poor attendance is viewed solely as a curriculum engagement issue while underlying housing insecurity, poverty or family hardship remain unaddressed, interventions are unlikely to achieve lasting success.

Effective policy requires deep inquiry into root causes rather than assumptions about symptoms.

Policy Stability and Bipartisan Commitment

Improving educational attainment requires sustained effort over decades rather than electoral cycles.

Frequent shifts in priorities, initiatives and reform agendas can contribute to implementation fatigue, increase workload pressures and undermine confidence within the profession.

APPA supports a bipartisan commitment to addressing educational attainment through long-term, evidence-informed reform.

Educational improvement should be a national endeavour that extends beyond political cycles.



Listening to the Profession

Teachers and school leaders must be central participants in the development of strategies designed to improve educational attainment.

Primary school leaders witness daily the realities facing Australian children and families. Their professional expertise, combined with the lived experiences of students and communities, provides valuable insight into both the causes of educational disadvantage and the strategies most likely to address it.

Policy developed with the profession is more likely to succeed than policy developed for the profession.

Recommendations

APPA recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Adopt a whole-of-government approach to educational attainment that explicitly addresses the social determinants of education.
2. Expand investment in early childhood development, family support and early intervention services, particularly in communities demonstrating high levels of developmental vulnerability.
3. Support the successful implementation of Thriving Kids to ensure vulnerable children and families can access coordinated health, wellbeing and developmental services.
4. Invest in early intervention programs that strengthen boys' language development, emotional regulation and social competence during the early years, recognising their higher rates of developmental vulnerability.
5. Ensure strategies addressing differences in educational attainment recognise the influence of gender, wellbeing, identity, belonging and engagement, and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to reflect the diversity of learners.
6. Develop a national strategy to address workforce shortages in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities.
7. Establish nationally coordinated mentoring and tele-mentoring programs to support early career teachers and school leaders in hard-to-staff schools.
8. Reduce unnecessary compliance and administrative burdens on teachers and school leaders.
9. Strengthen coordination between education, health and disability systems so children can access both learning and intervention without sacrificing either.
10. Invest in initiatives that strengthen student belonging, wellbeing, agency, engagement and positive learner dispositions.
11. Support schools to implement evidence-informed, movement-rich and agency-rich pedagogical approaches that improve engagement for boys while benefiting all learners.
12. Ensure school infrastructure supports contemporary teaching and learning approaches.



13. Commit to long-term bipartisan education reform that provides stability, continuity and confidence for schools and communities.
14. Place teachers, school leaders and communities at the centre of future policy design, implementation and evaluation.

Conclusion

Educational attainment matters profoundly for individuals, communities and Australia as a nation. Educational attainment is maximised when schools are supported to focus on high-quality teaching, evidence-informed pedagogy, strong relationships and inclusive practices that enable every child to participate, progress and succeed.

However, attainment is not determined solely by what happens in classrooms. It is shaped by the experiences children have before school, the opportunities available to their families, the health and wellbeing supports they can access, the quality and stability of the workforce that teaches them, and the extent to which they feel safe, connected and valued.

Improving educational attainment requires more than educational reform. It requires coordinated action across government portfolios and sectors, a commitment to addressing disadvantage at its source, and a recognition that schools cannot carry this responsibility alone.

APPA stands ready to work with governments, communities and stakeholders to ensure every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to thrive, learn and succeed.

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