When Worlds Collide: Evaluation at the Intersection of Policy, Curriculum and School Improvement

NSW Department of Education

AES26 International Evaluation Conference | Darwin 2026

Boundaries and Bridges

E Ў ³ Ѷ ℅ = ℅ ƈ Ẁ Ỳ ! P P ¦ ₡ ₱ ł ℅ ₱ Ў Ж

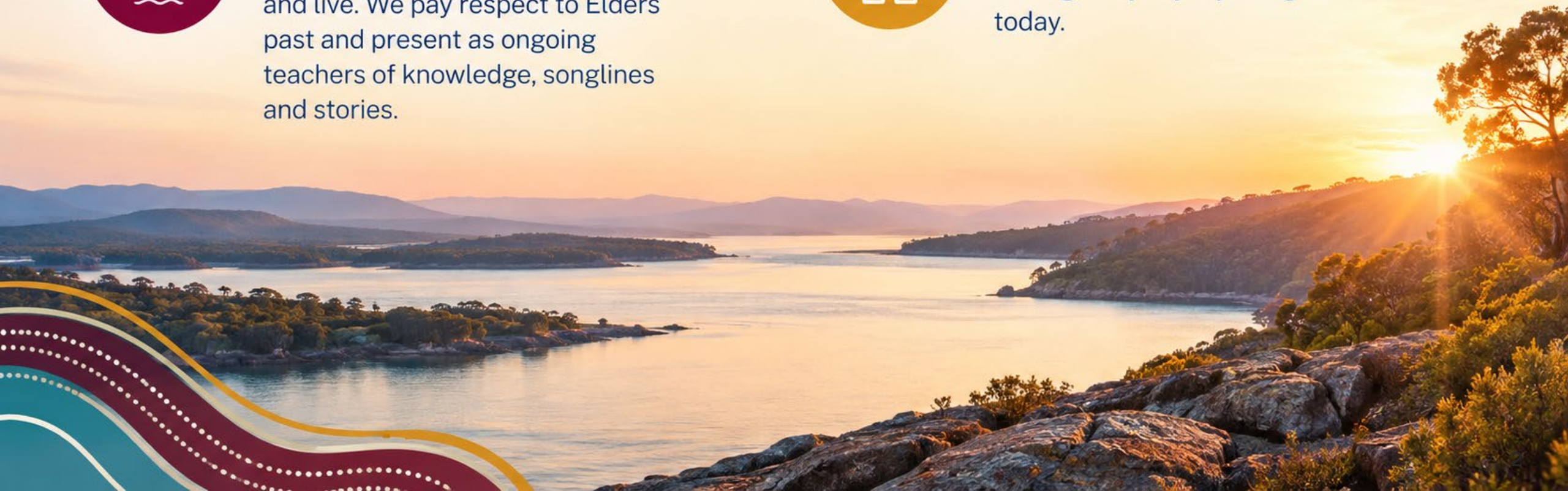
Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation | Evaluation & Effectiveness

NSW GOVERNMENT

Acknowledgement of Country

We recognise the **Ongoing Custodians** of the lands and waterways where each of us work and live. We pay respect to Elders past and present as ongoing teachers of knowledge, songlines and stories.

We pay respect to elders past and present and to any **Aboriginal people** joining us today.



Ñ■ý┘■Ę ý—

1. **The context**
   Macro, meso and micro environments — mapping the evaluation ecosystem

2. **The program**
   Scale, ambition and structure of the R&N Program

3. **≤ąýXx■, ś╟, ╚ęŰ**
   Working across many worlds — disciplines, teams and structural complexity

4. **Bridges & boundaries**
   What held, what couldn’t be forged, and what evaluation found

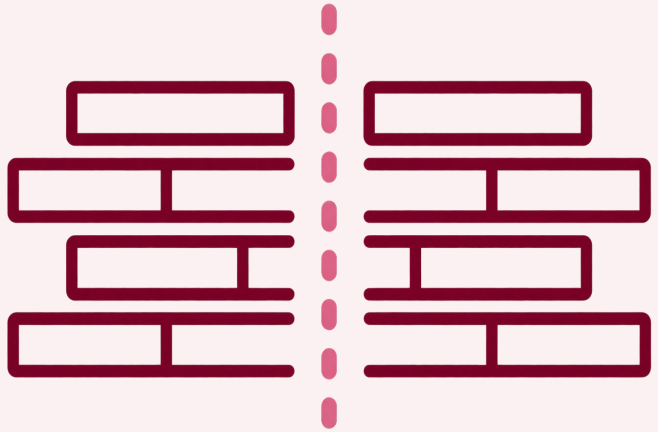
5. **What this means**
   For evaluation practice, the ecosystem, and the community

Two lenses for the story: Bridges and Boundaries



BRIDGE

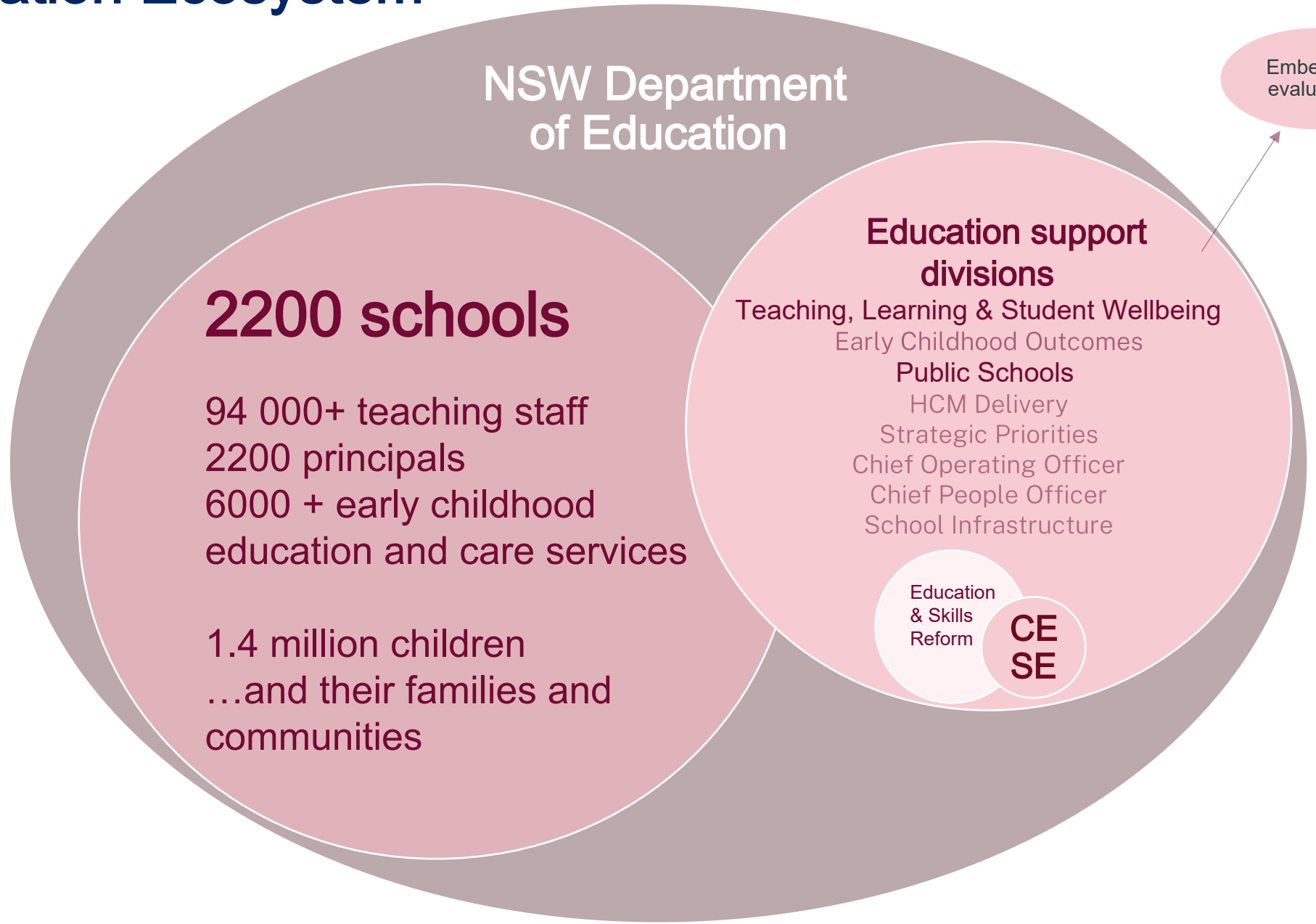
Where connections were built — deliberately, carefully, and sometimes under pressure. Where two worlds found a way to work together.



BOUNDARY

Where worlds met but didn't connect — or couldn't. Some boundaries were firm. Some needed a bridge to cross. Some remained.

The Evaluation Ecosystem



The Players: Who Makes Up the Ecosystem?

Education support teams roll out interventions, programs and policy to support the work of school.

@Ęýˇ ╚ѳ┘‖ŸEž ‖ˇ , ╚ęŰ, śX
uý, žý┘‖ąĘ┌Ẍ@Eu ‖I



Principals and school leadership

Education support including the embedded evaluation team



CESE: Evaluation & Effectivene

The Director, Educational Leadership has a key strategic role in supporting the continuous improvement of principals in NSW public schools

The Reading and Numeracy Program

Universal Support (US)

Online resources & PL for all 2,200 NSW schools via the Universal Resources Hub (URH). 344 evidence-based Reading & Numeracy resources.



Principals of all schools

Guided Support (GS)

Shoulder-to-shoulder support by Directors, Educational Leadership (DELs) for up to 430 schools with highest potential to lift NAPLAN top-2-band students.

Directors, Educational Leadership (DELs)



Strategic School Support (SSS)

Intensive, targeted support by content specialists via a 6-step co-designed improvement process. 135 schools across 3 tranches.

Education support including the embedded evaluation team



The Evaluation: A Story of Boundaries and Bridges

What we set out to do

Did the program improve reading and numeracy outcomes?

Ñ ˇ ą , Ű ¯ ý ž ẅ

What worked, for whom, and why across the three tiers?

Implementation evaluation; understand how.

Two boundaries we successfully navigated

COVID & natural disasters

Schools in crisis. Program not fully delivered as designed. The program we planned to evaluate was not the program that ran.

Government reporting cycle

≤ ą ý ¸ ■ , ś ╟ , ╚ ę Ű ═ , ╟ ¾ ů ý Ą Θ ╟ Ű ž ═ ┬ ą Ż ¾ ń ○ ý ž X ┴ ý ┌ Θ ┘ ╚ ę Ű ¯ ¾ ý , ž ś ╚ ę ý ═ ą ł ś ý ¾ ╚ ą ý X ┬ Θ ¯ ┘ , ů ═ , ╟ ¾ ╚ ś X ¸ ý ╚ Ű ¯ ¾ ý ś ł ■ ý ┴ ý ž ẅ

A bridge we had to build

Building the bridge

- Identified what remained feasible.
- Designed to meet both accountability and improvement needs.
- Proposed, negotiated, and got agreement.

The bridge was not just the conversation. It was designing what was still feasible, proposing it credibly, and navigating the ERG and program owner requirements to deliver something valuable.

Crossing the Education Disciplinary Boundary





NSW GOVERNMENT

📋 Curriculum reform
& syllabus alignment

📊 Data analytics
NAPLAN, Scout, URH
usage data

🏫 School improvement
Capability -building
& leadership

📚 Professional learning
Design and delivery
across modes

⚖️ Multiple concurrent
initiatives

💻 Tech infrastructure
Hub, MyPL & digital
data collection

🤝 Embedded evaluation

Roles across program delivery & evaluation

CESE
Impartial evaluation discipline

↔

Evaluative practice within Education

Proximity ↔ Independence

Proximity gave insight and access that required deliberate agreements and honest negotiation when boundaries blurred.

These operational divisions became connected through the program— and through the evaluation. The bridges we built across them were not optional. They were necessary.

Bridges Built, Adapted, and Their Toll

NSW GOVERNMENT

œ EX@œ@ ¥£X uœ ’ ™X EE@X£ÑX¤ ∏œu@X£_ EX¤ £ c@Z E

Bridges we found and adapted

Universal Resources Hub

Adapted as eval data vehicle — pop-up surveys met teachers where they were

Collaborative teacher survey

One shared instrument across 4 programs — better rates, less burden

DEL and principal survey infrastructure

Added eval questions to existing infrastructure COVID had otherwise closed

E○E╢╚Ę¯Xx, ╚, X╢Θ╢╚ý ╢

NAPLAN, Scout, URH analytics — already there, more critical than ever

SOME CONNECTIONS NEEDED CONSTANT ATTENTION

Bridges we had to build

- **Evaluation teams**

Ran through every phase — planning, data collection, reporting. Not a one-time crossing.

- **Program ↔ evaluation**

Built trust, shared understanding, navigated sensitivities across a long and complex engagement.

ZE≤≤c ZX: £Ñ™™X@ÑE™ ¥£X E | X E£ YE: ≤XEŒc@E : E

The toll

WE GAINED

✓ Continuity

✓ Access

✓ Flexibility

✓ Ability to keep evaluating

BUT WE PAID

X X@, ╚, X╢, s╚▪X╚, ž ý A⊖d╢

✗ Methodological limitations

✗ Less robust evidence in some areas

Be transparent about the toll.

Where Boundaries Held and Bridges Could Not Be Forged

01

Program Design

™ ą ŒŚÁÝ ■ ý ś † ┘ ˇ Ł ę ý

Guided support not mandated and DELs defaulted to judgment. The Strategic support embedded evaluation team had firm boundaries.

No bridge carried the intent from centre to school gate.

02

System Logic

Equity

Selection favoured highest lift potential, not deepest need. Small schools excluded by data volatility.

The bridge between ambition and equity was never forged.

Primary Schools

Secondary Schools

Designed for all schools, built for primary. 80% of secondary teachers never used the URH. Half as many secondary principals felt supported.

A design assumption never questioned until evaluation named it.

These boundaries were not failures of effort. They were structural and naming them is what rigorous, evaluation is for.

BRIDGES & BOUNDARIES

œą, ■, ś||, ŰX@||Ű˜ ý śX ŰŰĘ ||ýž

Why cross-disciplinary evaluation is not a luxury, it is a necessity

NSW GOVERNMENT

🔍 Surfaced invisible assumptions

DEL role, secondary applicability, equity of selection, none were documented as risks. Evaluation made them **visible**.

🌉 Named the gaps

Between policy and practice, co-design and capacity, primary design and secondary reality. **Without cross-disciplinary reach**, each looks like an **isolated implementation problem**.

🔗 Integrated two teams' findings

CESE and TQI covered different tiers with different methods. Integration required **methodological transparency** and **deliberate co-production**.

📐 X ||ý||ýžXý||Ę ŰXO Ę

Evaluated whether the SSDF model was **fit-for-purpose**, not just whether it was implemented. Required working across education research and program design **simultaneously**.

📢 Amplified overlooked voices

Secondary teachers. Small schools. Schools not selected. Evaluation **created the evidence base for equity** arguments that program metrics alone would not have produced.

⚡ Distinguished types of failure

Implementation failure vs design failure vs contextual disruption. COVID complicated everything. Evaluation had to **separate noise from signal** across all three.

For the Evaluation Community

What this means for how we think about evaluation's role and boundaries

CROSS BOUNDARIES

Different disciplines.
Shared purpose.

EXAMINE BOUNDARIES THAT HELD

The gaps, tensions and disconnects that matter.

BUILD BRIDGES

Shared language.
Honest negotiation.

HAVE THE COURAGE

Name what we see.
Keep students at the centre.



≤ą , ŰŘ✕▪Θ╟

Please check out our report

E:
zina.baghi@det.nsw.edu.au
annette.waters7@det.nsw.edu.au

SCAN ME

