

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

Position Arising from the Curriculum Policy “The Charter on Primary Schooling”

as adopted at the
November 2007 Federal Executive

Introduction

The AEU supports the Australian Primary Principals Association in its initiative in raising the issue of the purpose and content of primary schooling in “The Charter on Primary Schooling”. It is a timely and important issue that is deserving of deep consideration and discussion.

Primary education is of legitimate interest to all those concerned with the education of children, including parents, governments, society at large and teachers of students of all ages, as well as principals.

Notwithstanding the consultation to date and consequent production of a revised draft, it is important that if the document is to be advocated beyond its originating organisation it be viewed as the basis for further discussion and consideration before it is applied in specific contexts.

As the organisation representing the majority of teachers and principals in both primary and secondary schools, the AEU would expect to be involved in such discussions.

The Rationale for the Charter

The AEU supports the concept of a charter as one way to begin to address the neglect of primary education in many of the national debates on education in Australia.

As a starting point for discussion, the draft Charter is a positive step and the AEU understands the sense of frustration experienced by many in primary schools, who have felt and continue to feel under pressure to expand the curriculum and to take on additional responsibilities and roles.

It would be useful to more closely analyse these pressures and to distinguish between them. The Charter suggests at least three:

- “a growing trend to load primary school with every issue others are unable to solve”,
- “primary schools cannot teach the full range of learning areas and content set out in curriculum documents”,
- Accountability.

These are considerably different issues and perhaps require a wider range of more specific responses.

In particular, difficulty in meeting curriculum requirements requires a more complex analysis and response than simply reducing what is taught.

The loading of schools with “every issue others are unable to solve” is undoubtedly of concern, but they range along a continuum of importance. Some are fundamental to the development or protection of the child and society, others less so. They cannot all be treated as of the same status.

The issue of accountability is also worthy of more detailed consideration. The AEU believes that there is a growing trend for accountability to impose undesirable and unnecessary time consuming practices on teachers, rather than helping them to teach and students to learn. This is also part of a growing trend to increased bureaucratisation and “red tape” which should be minimised.

The Role of Primary Schools

Much of the section on “What Primary Schooling Should be Like” is a valuable explication of the role of primary schools.

However, given the increasing importance of early childhood education and the increasing recognition of the need to achieve universality of provision from at least the age of four, it would be appropriate to consider the relationship of and transition from early childhood education to primary school.

This could also lead to greater consideration of the early years of primary school as the Charter seems to assume a commonality of approach through the primary years. Movement and physical development, for instance, should feature more prominently in these early years.

The apparent antipathy to middle schools is not explained, and thus is mystifying.

The AEU would also see a need for greater reference to social equity, diversity, and the particular situation of Indigenous students.

In this regard, it is extremely concerned that the Charter argues:

“...there are continuing substantial demands on schools to accept responsibility for supporting children in dealing with a wide range of social problems. Schools have often voluntarily taken on much wider responsibilities because they are directly faced with the consequences of social disadvantage, including poverty and domestic violence. It is the responsibility of schools to ensure that they only adopt programs and interventions of this kind if they can also protect their capacity to deliver on their core business, student learning.”

The AEU rejects the notion that social justice is an optional extra to be taken only when circumstances permit. There is every likelihood that this will mean it will only occur in situations which are privileged and will be denied to those most needful of it.

The Narrowed Curriculum

The AEU particularly supports statements made in the Charter which refer to the role of primary schooling as “A traditional focus on the whole child”, and stress “The importance of a rich, vibrant classroom and of schools which focus on creative cooperative and innovative teaching and learning”.

The principle difficulty with the Charter is its failure to meld these sentiments with the proposals for a narrowed curriculum.

The AEU accepts that the Charter takes some care to elaborate that the “core” subjects are not to be taught exclusive of other major areas of human knowledge, and that “all eight learning areas are important”. However, it still establishes a clear three tier system of importance, with English literacy and mathematics in the first tier, science and social education in the second and others as part of the third.

There is some attempt to suggest that “experiences in the arts (especially music), sport and physical activity, community activities, the use of learning technologies, rites of passage, matters of spirit and activities involving other languages and cultures” can be delivered through the core areas, but this is unconvincing in a document in which the emphasis is about limiting the focus.

Whilst accepting that in terms of time, some areas will receive more than others, the AEU does not believe that it should be suggested that some learning areas are more important than others.

Of particular concern is the suggestion that “substantial involvement in the other learning areas depends on the critical and prior importance of ensuring that all children make satisfactory progress in the core areas”. Certainly English and mathematics are fundamental to all future learning, but to imply that achieving certain levels in these should be a precondition for receiving a broader education is to risk creating a two level system of schools. Those students most likely to find difficulty in achieving in these two “basic” areas are in general those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. They, in particular, need so much more than basic literacy and numeracy from school.

Resourcing

The AEU notes the APPA is initiating considerable and valuable research on the resourcing of primary schooling. However, it is disappointing not to see more consideration within the Charter of the extent to which some problems should be remedied through increased resources. For example the suggestion that “The emphasis given to non-core subjects will depend on ... the capacity of the school, including the availability of staff members with the expertise to teach the subject”, is a clear indication of an acceptance of inadequate provision rather than a call for improvement.

For instance, it would be desirable to include a proposal for welfare officers to be appointed in primary schools, and for there to be increased funding to create a clear funding differential in favour of those schools that have larger numbers of disadvantaged students.

Conclusion

The context and motivation for producing “The Charter on Primary Schooling” is both timely and worthwhile. The Charter provides a useful outline of the problems which primary schools face, of a cluttered curriculum and ever increasing demands which appear as distractions and obstacles to focusing on the “core business’ of teaching and learning.

However, the AEU is concerned that in seeking to provide a solution, the Charter moves too readily to jettison and narrow the activities, scope and aspirations of primary schools, rather than more deeply analyse the conflicting pressures and suggesting more creative and visionary methods of melding the many worthwhile expectations placed upon them.

The AEU also notes the APPA initiated paper “In the Balance: The future of Australian primary schools”, and will prepare a separate response to its recommendations.