

Australian Education Union



**Submission to the Working Group on
A National Declaration on the Goals of Schooling
(with reference to The Future of Schooling)**

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The Australian Education Union represents 175,000 teachers and educators in the primary, secondary, early childhood and TAFE sectors throughout Australia. As such it is uniquely placed to represent the views of teachers and educators on the establishment of new National Goals of Schooling.

The AEU believes that a new National Goals of Schooling should reflect the need to provide all young people, regardless of sex, language, culture, ethnicity, religion or disability, with the knowledge and skills they require to be successful in the 21st century. This requires a commitment to both equity and excellence, to support teachers and schools, and to proactively addressing the issues that impede just and fair educational outcomes for all.

The AEU accordingly welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission, and believes the development of a new National Goal of Schooling should take into account the following matters.

1. Public education

The AEU considers it extraordinary that *The Future of Schooling* fails to make any direct statement in recognition of the centrality of public education in capacity building, community building and nation building. It fails to recognise the role of public education in our society and what it can do for each individual child and the nation as a whole.

We hope that any revised goals of schooling would adequately reflect the role of public education.

Public education remains the key to a vibrant, socially inclusive and cohesive democratic Australia.

2. Equity

The AEU believes that the goals of equality of outcomes that were fundamental to *The Adelaide Declaration* must be retained in any future version of a National Declaration on the Goals of Schooling. This requires more than a simple commitment to equality of opportunity or the provision of “choices”, especially as such choices may only be available to some and may as such lead to an increase in inequity of outcomes. A commitment from all governments to improving equity is accordingly required, including a willingness to intervene proactively to promote real equality, improve outcomes and overcome disadvantage.

In this regard the AEU is concerned that much of the commitment to equality of outcomes in *The Adelaide Declaration* has been watered down in *The Future of Schooling* in favour of a lesser commitment to equality of opportunity to participate, and

for governments to provide educational “choices” rather than ensure an equality of outcomes for all. The AEU strongly believe that the spirit of *The Adelaide Declaration*’s commitment on equality of outcomes must be retained in a new National Goals of Schooling.

The AEU supports *The Future of Schooling*’s commitment to equality of opportunity and education free from “discrimination based on sex, language, culture, ethnicity, religion or disability, and of differences arising from students’ socio-economic background or geographic location” (p.29), but believes these concerns must be translated into an examination of system and government responsibility. Similarly, while the AEU agrees with *The Future of Schooling* that “it is no longer acceptable or affordable to have 15% of children not achieving standards” and with the stated need for schools to be socio-economically and culturally diverse, (p.17) this cannot be removed from the reality of the structural educational inequities in Australia’s education system in the early 21st Century. It is the responsibility of government to examine and reverse sources of inequity such as the federal government’s schools funding policy which exacerbates rather than ameliorates social divide.

3. Teacher, school and government responsibility and accountability

The AEU believes that a new National Goals of Schooling must recognise the appropriate roles of teachers, schools, education departments and governments in working together towards the common goal of achieving high quality education for all students in Australian schools.

In this regard, *The Future of Schooling* puts a great deal of emphasis on schools and teachers providing for educational outcomes, but very little on the roles or responsibilities of governments to ensure they are provided with the resources and support to do their jobs properly. While few would argue that the role of the individual teacher is very important, the AEU believes this emphasis on “in school” educational factors and “teacher quality” as a determinant of educational outcomes in excess of factors such as educational resourcing, class sizes, targeted programs or other issues related to school and student support narrows the discussion and agenda away from issues of equity and fairness.

“Teacher quality” cannot be seen in isolation to the context, resources and circumstances in which teachers are obliged to teach. An excessively individualist and blame based focus, emphasising the isolated aptitudes of the individual teacher out of context to system support, denies the collaborative nature of teaching. An over-emphasis on performance monitored teacher quality to the detriment of government and systems responsibility is a way to further lay responsibility for educational achievement, particularly for the education of disadvantaged children, solely at the feet of public schools and their teachers alone.

A National Goals of Schooling must accordingly emphasise the role of all players in working together to achieve equity, fairness and excellence in education, and in particular the role of government to properly and fairly resource and support schools and teachers.

4. Workforce issues

Professional Pay

The AEU supports a structure that rewards teachers who demonstrate high quality teaching, and has proposed a model of Professional Pay. As such, the AEU supports the principle of recognising and rewarding teachers and principals referred to in the Action Plan. It is important, however, that teacher quality and concepts of teacher professionalism be assessed upon multiple qualitative measures and collaborative structures of learning and support aimed at assisting teachers throughout their careers to improve their teaching practice. Assessment for professional pay and for other reasons should be based on qualitative measures actually related to teaching assessed by fellow professionals rather than narrow test and metrics based models of performance accountability.

That said, the AEU does not believe that an industrial matter such as this has an appropriate place in a declaration on the National Goals of Schooling, but if so it should emphasise the legitimate role of teacher unions in negotiating any industrial frameworks and instruments in relation to these matters.

Roles of non-teaching staff

The “effective use of non-teaching staff” advocated in the Action Plan is not defined. Support staff and teaching assistants presently play a valid and important role in schools. However, the weight of academic evidence indicates that the use of non-qualified teachers and para-professionals in teaching roles has a detrimental effect on the quality of education delivered and leads to a decline in standards. The AEU believes that a new National Goals of Schooling must support the employment of fully qualified teachers in all teaching and educational leadership roles.

Role of the principal

The Action Plan envisages an enhanced role of the principal in workforce issues. While the role of school leadership is obviously very important, the AEU believes collaborative school decision making structures involving teachers in decision making are vital to effective school management and the production and implementation of effective school programs. In particular the AEU believes that greater powers for principals in hiring and firing and job security issues undermine the stability and the professional independence of teachers and do not lead to enhanced student learning. Furthermore these are industrial matters that do not belong in such a document.

Harmonising teacher registration

The commitment to harmonising teaching registration is in the interests of AEU members and in accordance with the AEU policy. The AEU has already engaged with the Australian Teacher Registration Authority (ATRA) and its predecessor, the Australasian Forum of Teacher Registration and Accreditation Authorities (AFTRAA), in moves towards a national form of teacher registration and accreditation of teacher education courses, and will continue to engage with MCEETYA, ATRA, or other federal mechanisms in moves towards a national system of teacher registration. However, it remains difficult to understand the logic of including industrial matters related to employment in such a document.

5. Curriculum issues

The AEU supports a curriculum guarantee that provides all students access to a rigorous, rich and rewarding curriculum aimed at equipping them with all the knowledge and skills required to be successful in the 21st century, and believes this should be reflected in a new National Goals of Schooling.

In that context the AEU welcomes *The Future of Schooling's* commitment to high standards in literacy and numeracy, a position in accordance with the commitment to a rigorous curriculum made by the AEU. However, the document's failure to put such a commitment into the context of a broader and richer curriculum is a matter of some concern.

While an emphasis on literacy and numeracy is very important, there is no dichotomy between a commitment to high standards in literacy and numeracy and a commitment to a rich curriculum capable of giving students the skills and flexibility to acquire new knowledge in a changing society. In this regard the AEU would welcome an emphasis similar to that taken by *The Adelaide Declaration*, on students' critical thinking, problem solving skills and capacity to exercise moral judgment along with a commitment to high literacy and numeracy standards. Similarly, the AEU believes an emphasis on the role of the curriculum in producing informed and involved citizens such as that taken by *The Adelaide Declaration* would be appropriate.

School reports

The apparent contention in *The Future of Schooling* and the COAG agenda that census testing should play a central role in school reports is cause for some concern. Despite assumptions otherwise, testing, especially when divorced from coursework as in the case of the NAPLAN program, does not provide as effective a basis for determination of student learning or the reporting of it as does qualitative coursework based teacher assessment. An over-emphasis on State, Territory and Federal census testing in school reports could undermine both the quality of the reports and the role of teacher professionals in preparing them. The AEU supports qualitative reports prepared by

professional teachers based on coursework assessment, and believes a National Goals of Schooling would be enhanced by such a position.

Maths and science

The AEU believes Maths and Science are distinct areas of learning, and should be regarded as such in any National Goals of Schooling and separated.

Environmental education

The AEU believes a National Goals of Schooling should contain a greater emphasis than is presently apparent in *The Future of Schooling*, on environmental education possibly as a cross-disciplinary area.

6. A National Curriculum

The AEU is in support in broad terms of the approach to a National Curriculum taken in *The Future of Schooling*. The AEU is in agreement with a flexible approach, with states and territories able to innovate, respond and adapt curriculum to their particular needs, for individual schools and teachers to be able to make professional decisions about curriculum, and for flexibility of schools catering to different cohorts to be able to achieve educational standards in different ways.

Of some concern is the important role testing is afforded in *The Future of Schooling*. As the heading in the Action Plan *Testing to Improve Student Achievement* (Chapter Five) implies, the fact that full cohort testing does so is assumed, and the testing regime conflated with the concept of a national curriculum itself. With the establishment of the national NAPLAN tests preceding rather than following the development of a national curriculum there is a risk that this will lead to the development of a narrow test driven curriculum rather than a rich, engaging and rigorous one oriented to student needs. While course based testing is a valid, appropriate and necessary part of assessment, testing in itself does not improve student learning outcomes, and there is much evidence that an over emphasis on cohort testing does much to narrow curriculum, and damage the quality of education and student outcomes. Accordingly, while the AEU is in broad support of the flexible approach to a National Curriculum taken by *The Future of Schooling*, the AEU does not believe support for a National Curriculum in a National Goals of Schooling should contain support for national census testing.

7. Testing, public reporting of school based results, and league tables

The Future of Schooling makes considerable references to testing to improve student results, and appears to conflate the concept of mass standardised testing with high

standards. However, there is little evidence that such testing regimes improve standards. The AEU is concerned that National census testing imposed on the various state curricula will encourage curricula and teaching to be built around tests, and the higher the reporting accountability mechanisms the stronger this trend is likely to be. This will lead to a narrowed curriculum and a lowering of the quality of teaching. There is also strong evidence that high stakes census testing can increase educational inequity. The AEU strongly believes that in order to be effective and valid, tools of assessment tests must be diagnostic, written and marked by teachers, assessed against syllabus standards and built around what is actually taught to students. Teacher and school quality cannot be measured by a “snapshot”, especially based on testing divorced from course content. Where further diagnostic information is required on the particular needs of cohorts, schools or students with special needs, it can be obtained through the use of sample testing.

There is also considerable evidence that the public release of school disaggregated data that could be used for the creation of league tables is enormously damaging to the quality of education provided by schools, and this is particularly true of schools serving disadvantaged communities. Accordingly the AEU is concerned about references in the *Commitment to Parents and the Community* in Chapter Four to “ensure public availability of data on the value-added performance of schools at key transition points”, as well as to similar references in other parts of the document, such as the reference in Action 7 in Chapter Five to develop a plan for “public reporting on school performance, including a focus on ‘value added’”.

Research and experience in the UK and the US demonstrate that the public release of test based school disaggregated data and its inevitable tabulation into league tables leads to a raft of educationally damaging consequences, including issues around teaching to the test and the narrowing of the curriculum, the exclusion of students and cohorts perceived as harming a school’s standing, the failure to cater to the diverse needs of academically capable students and the failure to value and invest in diverse teaching strategies that encourage critical thinking, challenge students and leave with them with the flexible range of skills twenty-first century society and workplaces require.

The creation of school league tables would lead to a diminishing of the quality of education in Australia, a narrowing of the curriculum to the detriment of all students. It would increase privilege, inequity and disadvantage and harm the very students the supporters of such as regime most claim to wish to help. Nor is there evidence that the addition of a “value added” mechanism to school disaggregated data would mitigate these detrimental effects. While the validity of value added mechanisms in broad terms remain a matter of debate within the academic community, it is clear from research in the United Kingdom that value added performance measures, when used for the public reporting of data and the creation of league tables, are a flawed measure of school performance with the same drawbacks and damaging effects as raw score school comparisons and league tables.

The AEU accordingly believes that a new National Goals of Schooling should not advocate for either a national census testing regime or the public release of disaggregated school performance data.

8. Early Childhood Education

In light of the AEU's long term commitment to and campaign for universal provision of ECE, the commitment in *The Future of Schooling* to this area, along with the government's actions in making such commitments a reality is a very welcome development. While not completely in accordance with the AEU position the 15 hours a week provision of ECE for one year is a very good start to achieving the AEU's goal of 20 hours a week provision for two years.

The roll out of universal provision raises many issues of concern, including the prioritisation of Indigenous ECE, the proposed development of the National Early Learning Framework, integration with the child care sector and links between ECE and the early years of schooling. Issues around the public provision of ECE are of particular concern.

The AEU believes that early childhood education can most equitably and effectively be provided through public provision ideally collocated with public schools

9. Targeted intervention strategies

The AEU is in support of the aims discussed in *The Future of Schooling* for targeted funding to address the needs of students with special needs and for schools whose students are struggling to meet literacy and numeracy benchmarks (Action Plan point 4 in Chapter Five). These proposals are in accordance with AEU positions, and if such programs are fairly and properly targeted they would overwhelmingly benefit schools serving disadvantaged communities within the public education sector and provide a welcome opportunity to provide programs to tackle social inequities.

It is imperative that such programs be based on proper audit and accountability processes to ensure that most needy schools and students actually get assistance. There is evidence that some relatively well off schools were able to benefit from the national computers in schools and the Trades and Training Centres, despite the fact that they were allegedly aimed the most disadvantaged schools.

10. Individual pathways and class sizes

The AEU is in support of the advocacy of individual pathways in *The Future of Schooling*. Individual pathways are particularly important for assisting students with

special needs and in the identification and intervention of students with learning difficulties. However, the development and support of individual pathways requires time and the opportunity for teachers to engage with students at the individual level. In this regard it is disappointing that this issue is not linked to an understanding or advocacy of resourcing issues, particularly that of class sizes.

The failure of *The Future of Schooling* to make any mention of the importance of class sizes is a significant oversight that lessens the credibility of its claims to understand the issues involved in supporting improved educational outcomes. The AEU believes that a new National Goals of Schooling should support a student centred approach to learning including such factors as the provision of individual pathways, and that this should contain a specific acknowledgement of the importance of smaller class sizes in achieving these goals and improving educational outcomes.

11. Retention rates to Year 12 and transitions to work or further education

The AEU supports the commitment to increase retention rates in *The Future of Schooling*, as there is strong evidence, as pointed out by the document, that doing so maximises an individual's chances of a high standard of living and an opportunity to participate in society. However, once again the AEU is concerned system or government responsibility is minimised, with the document attributing completion rates to "the community the individual school serves and the variation in quality between teachers within an individual school".

Issues of resourcing and equity are central to building schools capable of achieving this goal, particularly in the public education sector which teaches the majority of students at risk of early leaving. A well resourced school with good facilities and small class sizes, able to give attention to individual students and put programs into place to address their particular needs is far more likely to be able to encourage students to continue than one that is poorly resourced.

The availability of non-academic pathways are correctly seen as mechanisms for both increasing participation rates and obtaining smoother transitions from school to work or further education, including initiatives such as school based apprenticeships. However, the delivery of such programs has been identified as very difficult for most schools, particularly because of the "on-the-job" component. Given the natural synergies between the secondary school system and the TAFE sector, resources could be most effectively employed by encouraging and building on cooperation between these two sectors. The moves towards competition and contestability in VET services is of concern, as it is easier for schools to establish effective links to a properly resourced TAFE system delivering quality courses than a fragmented network of private providers.

In supporting the commitments to improving retention rates to Year 12 and more effective transitions to work and further education, the AEU believes a new National

Goals of Schooling should highlight the importance of proper resourcing in schools to encourage students to stay, as well as links with a properly resourced TAFE sector.

12. Improving Indigenous student outcomes

The commitment to improving Indigenous education is welcome. That said, the fact that *The Future of Schooling* only deals with this very important issue in a relatively cursory manner is a matter of concern, as is the fact that it is couched in the limited parameters of equality of opportunity rather than the more definite commitment to equality of outcomes in *The Adelaide Declaration*.

The AEU strongly believes that all Indigenous children should be provided with access to and participate in quality public education in their home communities. The AEU believes this should be provided as part of a broader strategy to improve the quality of Indigenous education and life. This includes building links with the local community, participation in strategies which aim to improve the social and economic infrastructure of remote Indigenous communities, improving access to early childhood education, increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers and education workers and supporting their roles in community schools. The AEU is further concerned about the adequacy of the Cultural Awareness training and induction to be provided to teachers, (pre service and in-service) being appointed to schools with high numbers of Indigenous students. High quality public education for Indigenous children is inclusive of local cultures.

The AEU accordingly believes that a new National Goals of Schooling should place more prominence on the importance of improving Indigenous student outcomes than is the case in *The Future of Schooling*, and that the factors discussed above should be taken into account when doing so.

13. Reducing Red Tape

Recent years have seen the development of increasing numbers of compliance measures on schools diverting resources from teaching and learning, many of which relate more to bureaucratic administrative regulation and accountability requirements rather than improving the quality of education. An assessment of the effectiveness of these mechanisms, State, Territory and Federal, to determine whether the data they collect actually leads to improvements in educational outcomes would be welcome.

Recent incidents involving the fabrication of student enrolments have shown that some private schools benefit from too little accountability rather than too much. While reducing red tape in many areas would be welcomed, accountability mechanisms for all schools which receive government funds should be the same in both resourcing and curriculum areas.

14. A National Forum and educational debate

The AEU welcomes the proposal to hold a National Forum, as it would in any consultation process involving issues identified in *The Future of Schooling* or elsewhere. As the most representative voice of educators, the AEU will continue to articulate the needs and aspirations of public education, our students and members.