



Australian Education Union

Submission

to the

National Education Agreement Taskforce
National Education System Group
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace
Relations

on the

MCEETYA Action Plan 2009-2012

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Introduction

In working towards educational reform and putting into place an effective MCEETYA Action Plan for 2009- 2012, it is important to recognise that Australia already performs very well in international measures of literacy and numeracy ranking seventh out of fifty-five countries on the OECD PISA scale for literacy and thirteenth for numeracy. As such it is clear that Australian schools and teachers perform very well by international measures. While it is important that we continue to strive for improvement, such improvement should be built on previous achievement rather than pandering to a false sense of educational crisis that is not supported by evidence.

While all educational systems should clearly strive for continual improvement, an entirely different approach should be taken in the face of a system that is demonstrably failing to one for which the evidence suggests is fundamentally succeeding. The former situation would call for systemic changes, while the latter would call for assessing strengths as well as weakness and building upon them.

This is not to say that the Australian education system is without its difficulties, inequities, or that it does not contain major issues that need to be addressed. As Professor Barry McGaw points out, Australia can be classed as a “high quality, low equity” country, in that the difference between the highest and the lowest achieving students is greater than the OECD average, and educational disadvantage is more related to socio-economic status.¹

The focus of educational reform should accordingly be on addressing educational inequity. Supporting and properly resourcing the public education system, which educates the majority of Australian students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, must be central to this process.

In this context, the AEU considers it extraordinary that the action plan fails to make any direct statement in recognition of the centrality of public education in capacity building, community building and nation building, and in overcoming social and educational disadvantage. 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 the final action plan will adequately reflect the role of public education.

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

¹ BcGaw, B. *Closing the Achievement Gap* (power point presentation).
www.decs.sa.gov.au/salisbury/files/links/Closing_the_achievement_ga.ppt

Evidence base

Any educational changes facilitated by the action plan must be founded upon an evidence base of what actually works in achieving effective student educational outcomes. In this regard the AEU is concerned that certain courses of action advocated in the action plan are contrary to the evidence and research base from around the world as to what constitutes effective educational practice. This is particularly so concerning the section entitled *Strengthening Accountability and Transparency*. It advocates practices concerning the disclosure of disaggregated school information that have been demonstrated to have a detrimental impact upon the quality of education, narrowing the curriculum and increasing inequity, and appears to be based on the ideological preferences of a narrow band of self declared experts who do not enjoy the confidence of the wider educational academic community. Advocates of narrow testing, league tables, and test based accountability regimes have not presented credible and broad based evidence in support of their claims that such practices improve educational outcomes for students. On the contrary, this submission presents strong evidence, based on academic research around the world, concerning the educationally detrimental effects of such regimes.

Interpretation

There is much in the Melbourne Declaration that is interpretable, and the draft action plan has sought in many incidences to flesh out these into practical courses of actions. However, much in the action plan remains imprecise and lacks detail, making it difficult to respond in an informed way. Genuine consultation requires enough detail to properly respond to each proposal.

Developing stronger partnerships

Parental engagement strategies

The AEU recognises the importance of strategies to encourage parental engagement and develop effective partnerships between school, teachers and parents. Such partnerships are vital in facilitating student educational achievement, and in overcoming social and educational disadvantage. At the same time there needs to be a recognition of the particular requirements and resources some schools will need to facilitate this, particularly schools serving disadvantaged cohorts and with a large proportion of students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Partnerships with higher education providers

The AEU believes that facilitating partnerships with a well resourced TAFE system is vital in the development of a variety of approaches to secondary education, and may facilitate smoother transitions between school, work and further education. Cooperation between

secondary schools and the TAFE sector is an important way to enhance student options and encourage higher retention to Year 12.

A well resourced and supported TAFE sector is accordingly central to these goals. The present moves towards contestability and competition within the VET sector are of considerable concern in this regard. Schools are far better positioned to establish effective links with a stable and well resourced TAFE system than with a fragmented network of private providers with unknown or mixed quality.

The AEU also recognises the importance of developing partnerships with the higher education sector to share knowledge, facilitate transitions to higher education and provide students with knowledge and opportunities to various academic and non-academic pathways.

School-community partnership, especially for low socioeconomic status schools and with higher numbers of Indigenous students

The AEU supports measures to encourage school-community partnerships, and the vital role they play in facilitating cultural understanding and the development of appropriate educational strategies and programs in Indigenous communities in particular. That said, such partnerships should not be regarded as a panacea or a substitute for providing the resources needed to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous or low socioeconomic communities.

The AEU believes that efforts to address Indigenous educational issues should be seen as part of the process of Reconciliation, and that this should be explicitly recognised in the document.

The action plan should also include a commitment that non-Indigenous Australians develop and understanding of Indigenous issues and cross cultural understanding.

Facilitating school-community partnerships

School community partnerships, including partnerships with business and various kinds of community groups provide valuable opportunities to facilitate student learning, particularly in regard to work experience programs and programs that allow community groups to share their knowledge and experience with schools and students.

There is a danger that under some circumstances this can leave the door open to inappropriate connections with businesses and community groups. It would clearly be unacceptable, for example, for business and community groups to use partnerships with schools for the promotion of products for commercial benefit or to influence school programs and or the curriculum.

A code of conduct should be developed for the conduct of such partnerships to ensure that they enhance educational quality and do not lead to inappropriate practices.

Partnerships between schools

Greater cooperation between public schools, including the sharing of resources and joint initiatives and programs has the potential to benefit all parties, and to facilitate the cross fertilisation of ideas, pedagogical methods and educational programs between teachers, students and school leadership teams.

Supporting quality teaching and school leadership

New professional standards

A condition of the development of new standards for the teaching profession is that they must involve teachers and their unions. Any implementation of such standards requires direct negotiations with the industrial representatives of teachers – their unions.

A framework to guide professional learning for teachers and school leaders

The AEU believes that this proposal needs to be spelled out in greater detail and clarified. Once again, any professional framework should be negotiated and developed in consultation with the teaching profession and their unions.

A commitment to “recognition and reward for good teaching”, along with “improved pay dispersion to reward quality teaching”

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. However, the AEU is concerned that the word “dispersion” may be interpreted to mean rewarding some teachers at the expense of others. It must be clear that a professional pay scheme that recognises teacher achievement must not be undertaken by elevating some to the detriment of others. Such a scheme must be based on new additional measures on top of what teachers already have. New resources are required to introduce such a scheme.

It is important 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 should be based on measures actually related to teaching assessed by fellow professionals rather than narrow test and metrics based models of performance accountability.

A commitment to work for national consistency in teacher registration

The AEU supports moves towards national consistency in teacher registration and will continue to engage with the Australasian Teacher Regulatory Authority (ATRA), with MCEETYA and other bodies towards this goal.

A commitment to “new pathways into teaching”

The AEU is concerned by the reference to new pathways into teaching. This clearly refers to stated plans by the federal government to establish an “accelerated path” into teaching by developing a new scheme to recruit “high-achieving” graduates into teaching based on the “Teacher for America” (TFA) or “Teacher First” programs in the US and the UK. The AEU believes such a program would be educationally counter-productive, would not improve student educational outcomes, and would undermine the quality of the teaching workforce.

In the US, a Stanford study concludes that “...certified teachers consistently produce stronger student achievement gains than do uncertified teachers. These findings hold for TFA recruits as well as others ... uncertified TFA recruits are less effective than certified teachers, and perform about as well as other uncertified teachers.”²

The moves towards shortening and undermining the quality of teacher education also fly in the face of mounting research demonstrating the importance of high quality teacher education. Connors’ research highlights what she sees as threatening teacher education “...is the inadequacy of the practicum – the duration and the quality of the time devoted in undergraduate programs to gaining practical experience in schools.”³

It should also be noted that such schemes in the US and the UK are introduced in contexts in which schools already employ considerable numbers of unqualified teachers, in contrast to Australia which does not, and an assessment of the impact of such programs in those countries simply does not make a valid comparison to the situation here.

Furthermore, the short amount of time participants are expected to remain in schools is also a matter of concern. Professor Steve Dinham of the Australian Council for Educational Research recently stated,

“...there is no such thing as a ‘born teacher’, and all teachers are capable of learning to be more effective. But it takes time for teachers to develop from novice to competent to expert, and the expectation that first-year teachers will immediately be capable is unrealistic.”⁴

² Darling-Hammond et al, *Does Teacher Preparation Matter? Evidence about Teacher Certification, Teach for America, and teacher Effectiveness*, Education Policy Analysis Archives, October 12, 2005 - Cited in Willis 2008.

³ Connors, L. (2007) *Time and tide – a report on the need to invest in the renewal of the public school teaching service*, NSW Public Education Alliance. P.29

⁴ ACER. *Schools do matter, say ACER education experts*. (Media release). 16 February 2009.

<http://www.acer.edu.au/1/index.php/news-item/DinhamCaldwell>

A scheme which envisages participants teaching for only a couple of years before moving on to other positions would simply not allow sufficient time for them to develop sufficiently as teachers.

In an address in 2007 to the European Reading Conference in Berlin, Andreas Schleicher of the OECD noted that Australia's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) literacy results placed it amongst the top tier of countries. He went on to attribute this high level of literacy achievement by Australian students to a high level of Australian teacher professionalism.⁵ A large part of such professionalism is the requirement that all teachers be fully qualified, and attempts to change this will undermine the quality of Australian education.

The AEU believes that all teachers must be properly qualified through four year tertiary courses, and that this should be explicitly recognised in the action plan.

Due to the exceptional circumstances of Indigenous communities and the importance of producing qualified Indigenous teachers, the AEU does, however, support programs such as the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) program in Queensland, that provides for Indigenous people in remote communities to become trained and qualified as teachers, noting that such schemes involve extensive courses of teacher education over time.

Improved “performance management” in schools

The implications of this statement are unclear, and the AEU believes that it is important that it be clarified.

It is hoped that it does not refer to low trust and inappropriate business management models of performance accountability based on test and metrics data such as those imposed upon teachers and schools in England and some parts of the United States. There is no evidence base that suggests such models lead to improved students learning. They can do much to undermine professional teacher judgement and the quality of education delivered to students.

The AEU does not believe that teacher professionalism can be assessed by limited testing based measures such as the NAPLAN tests. The AEU believes the NAPLAN tests, which are not based on coursework and do not reflect sophisticated measures, are instruments of limited validity and are not of sufficient quality or breadth to be used in the determination of teacher professional competency and achievement.

It must be understood that all teacher professional growth is a process that occurs over time, and is most effective when undertaken through collaborative structures that provide support for learning and improvement rather than allocate blame. Given the complexities of teaching

⁵ Schleicher, A. (2007) *Literacy Skills in the Information Age*. Paper presented to the 15th European Conference on Reading, Humboldt University, Berlin. Quoted in Luke, A. and Woods, A. (2007) *Learning Lessons” What No Child Left Behind can teach us about literacy, testing and accountability*. Australian Curriculum Studies Association. http://www.acsainc.com.au/content/lessons_from_no_child_left_behind.doc

such a process must recognise the situations of particular schools, cohorts and the particular issues such schools and teachers face. This requires a proper peer process involving teachers who recognise and understand such issues.

In this context, many references in the media and by politicians to “failing” or “underperforming” schools or teachers in reference to schools serving disadvantaged communities or cohorts and students with special needs is unhelpful, counterproductive, does not reflect a sophisticated understanding of educational issues, denies the responsibilities of governments to provide the resources to support such schools and serves to shift blame from governments and systems to teachers and schools.

The AEU supports a qualitative and fair process of teacher assessment based on professional peer review that assures that a fair process is in place, and includes support mechanisms that encourage ongoing improvement.

Improved reward structures and in-school support for teachers and leaders who work in disadvantaged Indigenous, rural/remote and hard to staff schools

The AEU supports increased and improved incentives to teachers willing to work in difficult to staff schools, and that such schools and teachers should be provided with additional resourcing and support. Such support must be provided as additional measures, and not at the expense of other parts of educational resourcing or programs.

Increased school based decision making about “recruitment, staffing mix and budget”

It should be noted that the Melbourne Declaration contains no specific mention of increasing powers for schools and principals in this area, and as such this reference in the action plan is an interpretation and elaboration of the commitment to action in the Melbourne Declaration.

Increased powers to principals to hire and fire has implications for the job security and professional independence of teachers. Advocacy for such changes is part of the moves towards imposition of devalued and deregulated neoliberal management cultures and systems on schools. There is no evidence that they enhance teacher professionalism or the quality of educational outcomes for students. The undermining of teaching conditions will not attract and retain dedicated and quality teachers to the profession.

School based hiring and firing will make schools compete for teachers. It will become increasingly difficult for hard to staff schools to attract qualified and experienced teachers.

The application of market principles which may benefit some but disadvantage many is rejected. Governments can not be allowed to abrogate their responsibility to ensure that all schools are properly staffed with a qualified teacher in every classroom across Australia.

Increased numbers of Indigenous specialist teachers and school leaders

The AEU supports properly resourced programs and measures to encourage Indigenous people to become teachers and school leaders. The AEU accordingly supports appropriate programs aimed at encouraging and supporting Indigenous Australians aspiring to become teachers and school leaders.

It is unclear what is implied by the term 'Indigenous specialist teacher'.

A common set of objectives for a national campaign to raise the status of teachers

The AEU supports this proposal. Improving teaching working conditions and raising the status of teachers is vital in supporting the existing teaching workforce and in attracting and retaining new teachers. However, such a campaign will mean little unless it is tied to real improvements in pay and conditions.

The AEU feels the action plan needs to make clearer the details of what is being proposed, the resources that will be allocated to it and how it will be linked to actually improving the status, pay and conditions of teachers. This should include proactive measures to recruit and retain new teachers.

The role of women in the teaching profession and in school leadership

The AEU is concerned that this section does not mention the very important role women play in the Australian education system and the issues they face. Women make up the majority of the teaching workforce, yet are underrepresented in school leadership roles. The AEU believes that proactive measures must be taken at federal, state and territory levels to recognise the facts that have led to these inequities and to address them.

Strengthening early childhood education

Support for the roll-out of universal provision of Early Childhood Education (ECE)

The government's actions in making such commitments a reality is a very welcome development. The roll out of 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 requirement for all early childhood education and care services catering to four-year-olds to be appropriately staffed with degree-qualified early childhood teachers to meet this entitlement is a significant and commendable step.

The AEU believes ECE must be provided through quality, free, secular, universally accessible public provision. The profit motive is incompatible with the primary obligation of government to deliver quality education and care for all children. This has been demonstrated

by the failure of the ABC Learning network. Accordingly, this development should provide the opportunity to encourage public ECE provision.

Such provision should be strongly linked to the early years of schooling, and integrated as far as possible with state and territory public education systems.

The AEU is concerned that the present proposal, whilst referring to government-funded programs, does not include a clear and unequivocal commitment to the abolition of fees or the free public provision of ECE. Access to, and affordability of, preschool education for families varies significantly across the states and territories, with considerable fees and user costs for ECE evident in some states. Evidence suggests that the capacity to pay limits access and opportunities for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. This ultimately undermines the goal of universal access to ECE services.

ECE Workplace issues

The AEU is concerned that 15 hours ECE teaching could lead to unwanted casualisation as it is less than a full-time teaching load. All teachers and education workers in ECE should have the right to appropriate recognition, remuneration, career paths and status and proper industrial representation through registered unions to ensure the protection of industrial rights. ECE teachers should accordingly have opportunities to full-time permanent reasonably paid positions with opportunities for career development and expansion. Proactive measures should be taken to avoid casualisation, limited term contracts or unwanted part-time employment. Measures must ensure that 15 hours provision does not lead to unwanted part-time employment, which would have a counter-productive impact on attraction and retention.

The proposed reforms in ECE provision will substantially increase the demand for fully qualified ECE teachers. This demand will come on top of existing staff shortages. The AEU accordingly supports pathway courses to increase levels of qualification as well as protecting the integrity of the ECE qualification through teacher registration and accreditation of ECE courses.

Development and implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework

The AEU welcomes and supports the development of the Early Year Learning Framework as a positive development that will contribute to the provision of effective and professionally delivered ECE throughout Australia.

Enhancing middle years development

Providing programs that are responsive to students' developmental and learning needs in the middle years

The AEU supports this commitment by governments to work towards providing targeted programs to address the needs of students in the middle years, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or identified as at risk of early leaving. As stated in the Melbourne Declaration, such programs must address the central importance of student motivation and engagement, and include tailored approaches that specifically consider the needs of individual students and cohorts.

Such an approach is in accordance with the AEU's advocacy for a rigorous, rich and rewarding curriculum. Such programs must recognise the importance of valuing professional teacher judgements to respond to the diverse needs of individual students.

However, the commitment to "support a range of actions", including the actions specified in the draft dot points in the action plan, mean little unless they are accompanied by a commitment to resourcing. Schools are already very aware of the issues their students face in the middle years. Teachers are well aware of the range of actions and strategies required to address the requirements of their students. The issue has never largely been to identify students at risk, or the issues facing them, or to identify appropriate measures to address them, but to have the resources to put such programs and strategies and programs into place. A commitment to the middle years will mean little if it is not accompanied by a commitment in the action plan to the additional resources needed to put effective new programs for the middle years into place.

Commitments to improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for students in the middle years with difficulties in these areas should form an important part of an effective middle years strategy, and the action plan should accordingly contain a commitment to properly resourced literacy and numeracy programs for the middle and secondary years of schooling.

The AEU believes there is also a need for sustained and adequately resourced support for literacy and numeracy beyond the early years, as is made very clear in the Victorian Auditor-General's just-released report on literacy and numeracy.⁶

The AEU also believes that an explicit commitment to research in this area should be part of the action plan.

⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office. (February 2009) *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement*.
http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/reports_publications/reports_by_year/2009/20090204_literacy_numeracy.aspx

Supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions

Support for access to Cert. III training courses in secondary schools and partnerships with universities, registered training organisations and businesses

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 this context the AEU believes the action plan should contain a specific mention of the importance of government support for a properly resourced and supported TAFE sector.

The requirements of providing access to Certificate III, establishing links with TAFEs and other programs related to school retention and effective transitions will impose a considerable burden on schools. The action plan must contain a commitment to provide these additional resources so such programs can be established effectively without damaging other aspects of the school program.

Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment

As mentioned in the introduction, Australia already performs very well in international measures of literacy and numeracy, ranking seventh out of fifty-five countries on the OECD PISA scale for literacy and thirteenth for numeracy. Accordingly, in advocating for a the promotion of a world class curriculum it is important to recognise that Australian schools do very well by international measures.

As previously mentioned, while it is important that we continue to strive for improvement, such improvement should be built on previous achievement rather than pandering to a false sense of educational crisis that is not supported by the evidence.

While promoting effective curriculum is very important, it alone will not alone address the issues of educational disadvantage. These issues require wider structural and economic reform and the allocation of appropriate resources.

Establishment of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

It is unclear what the precise role envisaged for the new authority will be

If the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is to control NAPLAN or other testing or metrics based data, it should produce and adhere to a strict code of conduct to ensure that school and system data is not misused.

Further comments on related matters are contained under the section “strengthening accountability and transparency”.

Development of a rigorous, world-class national curriculum from the first year of schooling to Year 12

The AEU believes the effective development of the national curriculum would be facilitated by a timetable for the development of all curriculum areas. This would bring greater clarity and allow for the establishment of a better implementation.

Development of plans to improve the capacity of schools to assess student performance, and to link assessment to the national curriculum where possible

Teacher professional judgment must be central to any ‘improved’ assessment proposal. Both assessment and reporting must be based on qualitative measures rather than narrow test of metrics based measures that narrow curriculum and do not provide a broad measure of student achievement.

Management of NAPLAN

The AEU position on national testing was expressed in December in our submission to the National Curriculum Board on the Shape of a National Curriculum, and it continues to be relevant to the MCEETYA Action Plan:

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.

Governments’ obsession with mass standardised testing and making judgments about teacher and school performance/quality on the basis of it will not enhance student learning or result in genuine educational accountability.

There is emerging a growing body of evidence that the high stakes testing regimes introduced in both the UK and the USA are having a severely deleterious impact on the education of students in those countries. At the same time, analysis of the results

of the OECD PISA tests is showing that the higher achieving countries such as Finland and Canada do not use high stakes testing and place a high degree of confidence in teacher professional judgment in the enactment of curriculum.

It would be foolish for Australia to ignore the experiences of other countries and go down a failed path at the very time those countries which have tried it are realising how flawed it is. The AEU is also concerned that National census testing imposed on the various 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.

Governments of all political persuasions use the term ‘accountability’ attached to tests to shift focus away from the responsibility of Government to ensure all children have access to a quality education. They also use references to testing to make simplistic and mostly spurious judgments about teachers.

There is no evidence that the introduction of mass standardised testing has ever led governments to dramatically increase resources to public schools. Rather, testing regimes are, more often than not, a political construct used by governments to create fake crises, to undermine confidence in public schools and to divert attention away from funding policies.

According to neo-conservative politicians and commentators ‘accountability’ ends at the classroom door. That is, that the teacher is solely responsible for the performance of students, irrespective of the ability and diversity of the student population, the resourcing available, the support provided and a myriad other variables beyond the control of the classroom teacher. The AEU believes that teacher and school quality cannot be measured by a “snapshot”, especially based on testing divorced from course content. Where further information is required on the particular needs of cohorts or schools, it can be obtained through the use of sample testing.⁷

It should be noted that the Melbourne Declaration contains no specific commitment to the continued use of national testing. The AEU accordingly believes that the action plan should not contain a commitment to the continuation of NAPLAN testing, and that the MCEETYA agenda should instead support more pedagogically and methodologically sound evidenced based approaches to measuring student and school educational achievement, such as sample testing and qualitative teacher judgement.

⁷ Australian Education Union. *Submission to the National Curriculum Board on the Shape of a National Curriculum*. December 2008. pp. 12 – 14. <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/2009/Natcurricsub.pdf>

Improving educational outcomes Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds

Closing the gap for young Indigenous Australians

The AEU strongly supports both these proposals. Such programs must be adequately resourced, and must be developed in a culturally sensitive manner in cooperation with Indigenous communities and the teaching profession.

Prioritisation of ECE programs for Indigenous children

The AEU welcomes and supports the prioritisation of the roll out of ECE to Indigenous children. There is considerable evidence that provision of quality ECE is a highly effective tool in increasing educational outcomes for Indigenous and disadvantaged students in particular, and is effective in reducing inequity in educational outcomes.

Targeted support to disadvantaged students

Targeted support is strongly supported by the AEU. Such support must be properly resourced, including a recognition of the importance of class sizes.

While these things are clearly welcome in regards to both Indigenous Education and targeted support for disadvantaged students, it is of concern that there is no mention of the role of public education in achieving these goals.

The AEU believes the action plan should explicitly recognise the need to provide increased targeted support and resources to our public education systems to address educational inequity.

“Attracting high quality principals and teachers to disadvantaged schools”

The AEU welcomes moves to attract and retain experienced teachers and school leaders to disadvantaged schools. However, the term “high quality” in relation to principals and teachers appears to suggest that disadvantaged schools do not already have professional and committed teachers and schools leaders. This is potentially demoralising for the hard working and committed workforces in such schools.

A far better approach would be an emphasis on providing support structures for teachers for them to maximise their opportunities to deliver a quality education.

“Strengthening school leadership in disadvantaged schools”, providing principals with greater flexibility on budgets, staffing and partnerships, along with “clear accountability for the learning outcomes of all school students”

The shortcomings of increasing principals’ powers to hire and fire have already been discussed, as have those of simplistic and limited performance and surveillance mechanisms.

While the role of school leadership is obviously very important, the AEU believes that 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.

Public education has suffered from over a decade of inadequate funding compromising the capacity of schools to properly meet the needs of low SES communities

Focusing on the needs of individual students, personalised learning programs, targeted support for disadvantaged students, mobilisation of tailored services from outside the school

The AEU welcomes commitments to focus on the needs of individual students. Personalised learning programs are a demonstrated tool in addressing educational underachievement, particularly for disadvantaged students, and as such are supported by the AEU. However, such approaches require considerable resources and support, particularly in regard to the provision of classes sizes, time release and other factors that allow teachers the opportunities to provide such individualised support. A commitment to individualised learning programs without an accompanying commitment to provide such resources is meaningless. There is strong evidence that one of the most effective ways in which to improve student educational achievement and target the needs of disadvantaged students is to reduce class sizes.

The AEU supports a commitment in the action plan to personalised learning programs, provided it is accompanied by an explicit commitment to provide the resources such an initiative requires, including a commitment to lowering class sizes.

The AEU believes that the reference to tailored services from outside the schools needs to be clarified. There are many incidences in which the use of services from outside the school is appropriate. However, there are incidences, such as the educationally discredited literacy vouchers introduced by the Howard Government, or the hiring of private consultants and services that do very little if anything towards enhancing the provision of educational programs.

While schools may, on occasion, choose to use on occasion reputable and accredited services from outside the school, it should be clear that they do so to complement their existing teaching programs and strategies, not replace them, and that all such activities take place under professional teacher supervision.

Strengthening accountability and transparency

This section is of considerable concern to the AEU, focusing as it does on the “transparency” agenda concerning the public reporting of disaggregated information about what is called school “performance” data.

The Melbourne Declaration states that governments will ensure that public comparisons will be fair, contain “contextual information and a range of indicators” and that “governments will not themselves devise simplistic league tables or rankings and privacy will be protected.” How this will be possible, if the proposals in the draft action plan are adhered to, is not clear. The evidence from the experience in England and the United States is that once school data is released the media will waste no time in compiling league tables based on raw scores. Legislative action is now required to prohibit their creation and publication by third parties.

The indications are that NAPLAN and other test and metrics based measures are likely to be afforded a high status and role in determining government “school improvement.” This is of considerable concern to the AEU given the enormous amount of evidence in the academic literature concerning the educationally detrimental effects in the United States and England of high stakes testing, league tables, and the damaging consequences of the public release of school disaggregated data.

In 2001 the US Congress and the Bush administration passed the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation, requiring that all students be tested at various years levels, with Federal funding linked to school performance. US academics Nichols and Berliner document that, as could be expected with such high stakes attached to it, the testing regime has had a profound effect on schools, curriculum, teaching and the treatment of students. They claim it has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, marginalising subjects not tested and narrowing the teaching of even core subjects to areas most specifically related to testing, to the exclusion of subjects such as history and art and aspects of English such as classroom discussions, creative writing and critical thinking. An increasing amount of classroom time is devoted to specifically coaching and cramming for the tests to the detriment of a richer more comprehensive and educationally beneficial curriculum.⁸

Nichols and Berliner claim that NCLB has led to the exclusion from the educational system of many of the students it was purportedly designed to help. Students seen as low performing, who were previously seen as challenges schools were obliged to assist are, they claim, increasingly viewed as liabilities. Excluding such students from enrolling or encouraging them to leave is an effective way by which schools can meet their proscribed proficiency and improvement targets. They report incidences of students deemed liabilities being bullied into leaving and dropped from rolls in states as diverse as New York and Alabama. Other purported practices include suspending students during tests and farming them prematurely into special education streams. The researchers document that high school drop-out rates,

⁸ Nichols, S.L. and Berliner, D.C. (2007) *Collateral Damage. How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard Education Press.

particularly amongst minority students, have actually increased in years 11 and 12 since the introduction of NCLB.

According to Nichols and Berliner, high academically achieving students are also adversely affected as schools concentrate upon what they call “bubble kids”: students just behind or on the cusp of achieving the benchmark levels. To maximise a schools’ chances of meeting its benchmarks such students are given inordinate priority and resources to the detriment of both students deemed unlikely to reach them at all, or proficient enough to reach them anyway.

Nichols and Berliner claim evidence of systematic cheating by schools, states and teachers, increased stress levels amongst both teachers and students, erosion of the teacher pool due to problems with retention and recruitment, unfair and unprofessional treatment of teachers in schools deemed “underperforming” and a lack of evidence that NCLB has led to educational improvement.

Many of the criticisms of NCLB in the US have been echoed concerning the testing, performance accountability and league table regime in England. Since 1992, schools have been evaluated by student performance in National Curriculum tests of English, Maths and Science sat at ages seven, eleven and at age sixteen by their five highest General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results.⁹ A more recent addition has been the introduction of a contextual “value added” measure to league tables, taking into account student improvement rather than raw results and factors such as ethnicity and socio-economic background.¹⁰

Many of the same problems claimed by critics in the United States under NCLB are identified by critics as operating in England. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has complained that teachers are forced to teach to the test and that tests distort the curriculum, that undue resources are pumped into students on the margin of the benchmark results to the detriment of others, that league tables confuse parents by measuring factors not related to the quality of teaching and that testing demoralises teachers and students and undermines the quality of education. Furthermore, the NUT and others have pointed out that the result of the National Curriculum Tests school league tables are often considerably at odds with school evaluations produced by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) system of school inspections which bases its assessment on observed educational practices and qualitative factors rather than test results alone.¹¹

Similar issues are also documented by the work of Warwick Mansell in his book, *Education by Numbers –The Tyranny of Testing*.¹² He notes the narrowing of the curriculum caused by accountability testing, the evidence of systemic cheating to enable schools to meet their

⁹ Tests in England at age 14 were discontinued in 2008.

¹⁰ Harris, B. (2007) *Why ranking Schools Would do More Harm than Good*. Paper for the AEU Federal Executive, Melbourne. p. 5

¹¹ National Union of Teachers. *The Case Against National Curriculum Tests*.

http://www.teachers.org.uk/resources/pdf/case_against.pdf (Viewed 22 April 2008)

¹² Mansell, W. (2007) *Education by Numbers. The Tyranny of Testing*. London. Politicos Publishing.

benchmark targets, the focus on “borderline” students to the detriment of others, and the lack of evidence that the testing and league tables regime has improved educational outcomes, noting an actual decline in English student performance in international measures.

The exclusion of lower performing students from schools has also been documented. In a study of school selection practices amongst London comprehensive schools West and Hind found that those with autonomy over their own admissions were more likely to exclude children with special social, medical and educational needs than schools whose admissions were controlled by a local authority, and that they did so on the basis of the effect this would have on their standing in the league tables. As could be expected, schools with such policies had lower numbers of students from lower socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds, scored higher in public testing regimes and league tables and found it easier to reach their benchmark targets. West and Hind accordingly attribute the steep hierarchy in school positions in league tables in London to these school admission practices.¹³

Value Added performance measurement and “like schools” comparisons

The AEU is also concerned by the draft action plan’s contention that such an accountability regime will be enhanced by the development of “value-added measures for schools’ performance and analysing students results over time” and “comparing individual school performance against schools with similar characteristics”.

The concept that simplistic “value added” measures may be used to produce data leading to meaningful comparisons of schools or teachers is a deeply flawed one, and there is considerable evidence in the academic literature that such attempts do not work and are counter-productive. 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 the creation of league tables or the comparisons of schools are a flawed measure of school performance with the same drawbacks and damaging effects as raw score school comparisons and league tables.

In the face of mounting challenges to the validity of league tables and raw test data, value added performance measures were introduced in England in 2002. Value added measures purport to judge schools not on their raw data alone, but by how much they supposedly “added value” to their cohorts and boosted their performances, judged by their primary school scores. The validity of such measures, however, has been questioned by researchers on a number of grounds.

Writing in 2005, Stephen Gorard of the University of York examines the 2004 scores based on the value added concept in York, Leeds, East Riding or Yorkshire and North Yorkshire.

¹³ West, H. and Hind. H. (2006) *Selectivity, Admissions and Intakes to “Comprehensive” Schools in London, England*. Educational Studies, Vol. 32, pp. 145 – 155.

He found that schools that produced a high value for raw “performance” scores also produced a very similar high score for the “value added” score as well, and vice versa. There are no low or mid attaining schools with high value added scores, and no high attaining ones with low ones. In fact he goes as far as saying that “...we could predict the value added figure for any school extremely well just from their absolute level of final attainment.”¹⁴ Gorard concludes that so-called value added scores are measuring the same things raw scores measure, namely the underlying socio-economic factors that make the “performance” scores for different schools with different cohorts different in the first place:

“Value-added scores are no more independent of raw-score levels of attainment than outcomes are independent of intakes.”¹⁵

Writers in the US have also pointed out that value added school performance scores can be affected by elements such as student mobility, changes in the demographic profile of schools and a variety of similar factors. Measurement factors such as statistical uncertainty and sampling errors can also cause fluctuations from year to year. Kane and Staiger from the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts conclude:

“Although gain scores are often touted as better indicators of a school’s ‘value added’, they are much more likely to be affected by idiosyncratic fluctuations in scores from year to year...attempting to estimate a school’s value-added is analogous to looking for a smaller needle in a bigger haystack.”¹⁶

Linn and Haug of the University of California reach similar conclusions:

“This volatility results in some schools being recognised as outstanding and other schools identified as in need of improvement simply as the result of random fluctuations.”¹⁷

Since 2006 England has added a Contextual Value Added (CVA) measure that takes into account a cocktail of socio-economic factors including poverty, ethnicity, English as an additional language and special educational needs. However, in January 2008 a study by Bristol University received considerable media attention by casting doubt on the effectiveness of such measures. The researchers point out that nearly half of all secondary schools are judged around average in the value they add. Therefore, the scores of many schools are very similar, leading the differences in their positions on league to be determined by very small differences in scores. These small differences, far too small for reasonable

¹⁴ Gorard, S. (2006) *Value-Added is of Little Value*. Journal of Education Policy, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 239.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 240.

¹⁶ Kane, T.J. and Staiger, D.O. (2001) *Improving School Accountability Measures*. Working Paper 8156, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge. Cited in, *School Performance Information. An Issues Paper for the ACT Minister for Education and Training*. Government School Education Council, ACT p.7.

http://www.gsec.act.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/38808/School_Performance.pdf

¹⁷ Linn, R.L. and Haug, C. (2002) *Stability of School Building Accountability Scores and Gains, CSE Technical Report 561*. Center for the Study of Evaluation, National Center for Research and Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing, University of California, Los Angeles. Cited in *School Performance Information*. Ibid. p. 7.

comparative differences in educational quality to be deduced, nevertheless leave them hundreds of places apart in the tables.

“...our analysis highlights further major problems with the current use of CVA to rank and compare individual schools. Given that almost half of the schools cannot be statistically distinguished from the national average, any ranking exercise based on these numbers will be largely spurious.”¹⁸

In comment reported by the Guardian newspaper the researchers were franker still, claiming that such contextually value added tables are “meaningless”, with some of the data “at best misleading, at worst dishonest.”¹⁹

In summary, the AEU reiterates the points it made in its submission on a National Declaration on the Goals of Schooling:

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.²⁰

Improve the capacity of schools to report in clear language to students and parents

The AEU supports clear and informative reporting to students and parents that informs them of student progress and aptitudes. In this context it is unclear what changes the draft action plan envisages when it advocates improving the capacity to do this. The AEU believes that if this is to be included in the final action plan it should be clarified. Reporting should also be based on qualitative professional evaluation and professional teacher judgement rather than

¹⁸ Wilson, D. and Piebalga, A. (2008) *Accurate Performance Measure but Meaningless Ranking Exercise? An Analysis of the English School League Tables*. The Centre for Market and Public Organisation. Bristol Institute of Public Affairs, University of Bristol. p. 11. - <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/CMPO/workingpapers/wp176.pdf>

¹⁹ Shepherd, J. “‘Fairer’ School League Tables Misleading – Study.” *The Guardian*, (Manchester) January 7, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jan/07/schools.politics> (viewed 4 May 2009)

²⁰ AEU, August 2008. *Submission from the Australian Education Union on A National Declaration on the Goals of Schooling*. (with reference to *The Future of Schooling*) p. 6

simplistic testing regimes and crude reporting systems that do not allow the flexibility schools need to ensure the particular needs of their students and school communities are met.

A commitment to develop protocols for the use and release information on schooling in accordance with the soon to be released MCEETYA-agreed Principles for reporting information on schooling

The AEU supports the development of protocols to guard against the misuse of information on schooling in ways that damage educational quality and equity.

The *Principles for reporting information on schooling* have not been released. However, the *Principles and Protocols for the Collection and National Reporting of MCEETYA Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia*, dated July 2008, highlights the ethical principles underpinning the publication of reports. Amongst other things it states:

“...the avoidance of harm to members of the community: this could occur where the privacy of individuals would be compromised or where the reputation of an institution or group of people would be damaged through the publication of misleading information or stereotyping.”²¹

Perhaps most significantly it states:

“No information that permits the identification of individual schools or students should be reported publicly without explicit permission.”

As noted previously, the Melbourne Declaration also states that:

“Governments themselves will not themselves devise simplistic league tables or rankings and privacy will be protected.”²²

To give meaning to this statement, the AEU calls on all governments to enact legislation prohibiting the creation and publication of league tables.

Implement fair, public, comparable national reporting on individual school performance, including comparing individual school performance against schools with similar characteristics

As demonstrated above, school comparisons, whether of schools as a whole or utilising a value added or like schools model, and are flawed measures of the quality of education delivered by schools and would have detrimental effects on schools, teachers, the quality of education provided to students, and to educational equity.

²¹ MCEETYA. (July 2008) *Principles and Protocols for the Collection and National Reporting of MCEETYA Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia*. p. 4

http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/Protocols_for_Collection_Reporting_of_KPMs.pdf

²² MCEETYA. (December 2008) Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. P. 17.

Review their engagement with government and non-government schools and systems to ensure that school regulation support the achievement of agreed outcomes and that all schools participate in and comply with national reporting requirements

As previously stated, the AEU strongly believes national reporting requirements should not include the reporting of student results either on an individual or a disaggregated school basis.

The AEU believes the major transparency issue concerns the funding of schools and accountability for public funding whether the school be public or private. Should non-government schools receive public funds they should be subject to the same accountability requirements as government schools.