

Social Equity in Education as a National Goal

**Submission on the Draft National Declaration on
Goals for Schooling**

Save Our Schools

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Summary

Save Our Schools (SOS) supports the social equity goal of the existing National Goals for Schooling. It opposes replacing this goal with the much weaker commitment to high quality schooling free of discrimination as proposed in the draft National Declaration on the Goals for Schooling. *The Future of Schooling in Australia* report fails to make a case for this change. The large achievement gaps between students from low and high socio-economic status families and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are the major challenges facing the Australian school system. Achieving social equity in school outcomes should remain a key national goal for schooling.

The National Goals for Schooling

The National Goals for Schooling comprise a preamble and three major goals defining a range of outcomes to be achieved by all students when they leave school. The focus of the National Goals is on defining student outcomes to be achieved rather than the necessary inputs into schooling.

The preamble outlines several key purposes of schooling. These include personal as well as social and economic purposes. The preamble also outlines the role of governments in providing high quality schooling.

The National Goals for Schooling incorporate a dual equity objective. In the first place, they establish a set of standards and qualities to be achieved by all students when they leave school. Goal 1 sets out a range of non-academic qualities to be achieved by all students. Goal 2 states that all students should attain high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding in the agreed eight key learning areas, in numeracy and literacy and participate in vocational learning. Goal 3, in part, states that all students should have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent.

Together, these requirements may be interpreted as a “minimum standard” or “adequate” level of education to be achieved by all students.

The second equity objective is contained in Goal 3. It states that schooling be socially just. This is explained as student outcomes which are **free** from the effect of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity or religion and are free of differences arising from students’ socio-economic background or geographical location. It also requires that the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students and Indigenous students improve and that, over time, they should **match** those of other students.

This equity objective may be stated as the social justice or “social equity” goal.

Draft National Declaration

The new draft National Declaration is organised as a series of commitments. These are:

- a commitment to the future of Australia;
- a commitment to parents and the community;
- a commitment to students;

- a commitment to rigorous curriculum standards;
- a commitment to developing outstanding principals and a high-quality teacher workforce;
- a commitment to equality of opportunity; and
- a commitment to collaborative federalism.

The overall commitment to the future of Australia is to provide high quality schooling to all students.

In essence, the adequacy goals contained in the existing National Goals for Schooling are retained in some form in the draft National Declaration. However, the social equity goal is replaced with the general commitment to provide high quality schooling to all students to ensure equality of opportunity. The draft National Declaration states that it is “high quality schooling that is to be free of discrimination and differences in background, not “student outcomes” as in the existing Goals. The goal that the school outcomes for low SES and Indigenous students should match those of other students has been omitted.

The Future of Schooling report fails to justify deleting the social equity goal from the Draft National Declaration and replacing it with a much weaker commitment.

The case for social equity in education as a national goal

Social equity in education means that students from different social groups should have similar average outcomes from school and a similar range of outcomes. While there is a range of talents, motivation and effort to succeed amongst individual students, there is no reason to accept disparities in educational outcomes for between members of social, racial or ethnic groups based on their different social circumstances or preconceptions about their potential abilities. The goal should be to close the gaps in educational attainment measured between such groups. This does not mean that all children should achieve the same education outcomes only that children from different social groups should achieve similar outcomes.

There is no reason to discard improving social equity as a key national education goal. The goal remains as important as ever, especially after its neglect during the Howard years.

There are massive achievement gaps between students from different social groups in Australia. Indeed, there is some evidence that it has increased over the last decade. Students from high SES families have much higher education outcomes than students from low SES families:

- 41% of students from low SES families fail to complete Year 12 compared to 22% of students from high SES families;
- On average, 15 year-old students from low SES families are over two years behind high SES students in reading, mathematics and science;
- 22-23% of students from low SES families do not achieve expected international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science.

Non-Indigenous students achieve much higher education outcomes than Indigenous students:

- 60% of Indigenous students who start secondary schooling do not go on to Year 12 compared to 25% of all students;
- On average, 15 year-old Indigenous students are over two years of schooling behind non-Indigenous students in reading, mathematics and science;
- 38-40% of 15 year-old Indigenous students do not achieve expected international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science compared to 13-14% of all Australian students.

The case for improving social equity in education remains as strong as ever. It is a moral, social and economic case. Principles of fairness and social justice demand that children from different social backgrounds have an equal start in adult life. Ensuring that all children receive an adequate education is an important step in this direction, but it is not a sufficient condition.

Social equity in education would not be achieved even if all students gained the minimum education threshold, such as completion of Year 12. Average outcomes of students from high SES backgrounds could still be much higher than those from low SES backgrounds even though all students in the latter group achieved the minimum standard. Low SES students could be clustered just above the minimum standard while the large majority of high SES students are clustered well above the standard.

Large disparities in education outcomes mean that the social group individuals are born into strongly affects their life opportunities. Large disparities in school outcomes according to different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Differential access to education blights a democratic society. In a democracy, education outcomes should not depend on family background and wealth. A democracy should strive to reduce the education advantage and disadvantage conferred according to whether a child is born to rich or poor parents or to a particular race or ethnic background.

Reducing social inequity in education would provide a massive boost to skill levels in the work force. The large disparity in school outcomes indicates a waste of talents, skills and resources. It is, in effect, a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity. Employers around Australia are concerned about skill shortages in the workforce. Reducing the achievement gaps in school outcomes would assist in alleviating these shortages.

Improving social equity in education outcomes can contribute to reducing social inequality and injustice in other areas of life. For example, it would help reduce the substantial gaps in health outcomes between rich and poor families and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families.

Equality of opportunity is a much weaker goal

Equality of opportunity is a much weaker goal than social equity in school outcomes. It is a much weaker goal because it fails to specify whether it refers to the outcomes of school or the provision of inputs into the learning process at school.

Too often in the past, equality of opportunity has been interpreted as just providing the opportunities to learn without reference to the outcomes. In practice, it has meant that if students fail to achieve success in school they are deemed to have they failed to take up these opportunities and it is attributed to their lack of talent or motivation. Those who don't succeed are judged as not capable of succeeding.

Equality of opportunity does not require any particular level of achievement for all students or the elimination of achievement gaps between rich and poor or between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It is consistent with wide inequalities in outcomes between students from different social backgrounds.

As such, equality of educational opportunity is a recipe for continuing inequity. It is a fundamentally unjust principle.

Adoption of equality of opportunity as an education goal fails to challenge the massive social inequities in education. As a result, these inequalities may be legitimised as the natural order of things.

Recommendation

That social equity in school outcomes is retained as a National Goal for Schooling.

In particular, it should be a national goal that:

“Schooling be socially just, so that:

- *student outcomes are free from the effect of negative forms of discrimination and are free of differences arising from students’ socio-economic background, ethnic and racial background or geographical location;*
- *the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students and ATSI students improve and that, over time, they match those of other students.”*