

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Policy Brief

**New National Education Goals for
Education Fail on Equity**

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January 2009

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Summary

The new national Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (the Melbourne Declaration) fails on equity. It fails on two grounds. It weakens the previous national commitment to improve social equity in education and it introduces a new policy commitment on reporting school results which will exacerbate inequities in student outcomes.

The Melbourne Declaration adopts a weakened commitment to improving equity in education. It does commit to the achievement of an adequate education for all students and to reducing achievement gaps between students from different social groups. However, its commitment to improving social equity in education is much weaker than the previous statement on national goals in education (the Adelaide Declaration) in three ways:

- It removes the key goal of achieving social justice in schooling which was in the Adelaide Declaration;
- It increases the emphasis on equity in access to education and reduces the emphasis on equity in student outcomes; and
- It weakens the commitment to eliminating achievement gaps between students from different social groups.

The new Declaration also contains a fatal policy contradiction which will undermine equity in education. It commits to both reporting individual school results and improving equity. These policies are incompatible.

Reporting the results of individual schools makes the publication of league tables of school results inevitable. This will entrench choice and competition between schools as the fundamental organizing feature of school systems in Australia. The international evidence shows that equity in education is diminished where choice and competition rule.

Reporting school results will exacerbate social segregation and inequity in education. It is better-off parents who make most use of league tables. Finding the "best" schools means those that have the fewest low-income and minority students. Popular schools are able to improve their measured performance at the expense of other schools by 'creaming-off' high achieving students from other schools and restricting the entry of low achieving students.

Social segregation increases disparities between schools in the extent of student learning needs and the real resources available to meet those needs. In addition, increasing concentrations of students from low socio-economic status families in some schools tend to lead to lower overall outcomes.

Reporting of so-called like-school comparisons is no answer to these problems. Like-school comparisons will lead to misleading and unfair comparisons because of flaws in the models for comparing so-called like-schools.

Australian governments have chosen to follow the example of the UK and the US - whose school systems generally perform worse than Australia - while ignoring the example of school systems that perform better. The highest achieving countries such as Finland and Korea generally make less use of comparisons of school results. The Melbourne Declaration means that the large achievement gap between students from high and low income families in Australia will remain and possibly widen.

Introduction

Australian Education Ministers released a new national declaration of educational goals for young Australians, called the Melbourne Declaration, on 12 December 2008. It replaces the previous Adelaide Declaration on national education goals.

The new Declaration is comprised of two major goals and a commitment to action in eight areas. The two goals are:

- Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and
- All young Australians become successful learners, confident creative individuals, and active informed citizens.

The commitments to action are:

- Developing stronger partnerships;
- Supporting quality teaching and school leadership;
- Strengthening early childhood education;
- Enhancing middle years development;
- Supporting senior years of schooling;
- Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment;
- Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds; and
- Strengthening accountability and transparency.

The new Declaration is considerably different from the Adelaide Declaration. The previous Declaration was a short statement focussed on outcomes goals for students while the Melbourne Declaration includes detailed commitments on particular aspects of education, such as quality teaching, curriculum and key stages in learning. The new Declaration also significantly revises the commitment to improving equity in education.

A major feature of the Melbourne Declaration is a new commitment to reporting the results of individual schools. This represents a key change of direction in national education goals which has implications for the commitment to improving equity in education.

Equity in education

The Preamble to the new Declaration states that Australia has failed to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians and this must be a key priority over the next decade. It acknowledges that in comparison with the world's highest performing school systems, Australian students from low socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented among high achieving students and over-represented among low achievers. It also states that there is room for improvement in Australia's rate of Year 12 completion or equivalent.

Dual equity objective is retained

The Melbourne Declaration can be interpreted as retaining the dual equity objective of the previous Adelaide Declaration, although this commitment is now expressed much differently and opens up some ambiguity.

First, the new Declaration commits governments to ensuring that all students receive a high quality education that enables them to complete their secondary school education. In particular, all students should develop:

- knowledge, skills and understanding in several key learning areas, especially in numeracy and literacy;
- key learning skills such as problem solving, evaluating evidence and planning; and
- a range of personal and social qualities such as self-confidence, honesty and respect for others.

These requirements may be interpreted as a “minimum standard” or “adequate” level of education to be achieved by all students. They are similar to the objectives of the Adelaide Declaration.

Second, governments are committed to ensuring that socio-economic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of education outcomes and that learning outcomes of Indigenous students improve to match those of other students. In effect, the commitment to removing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage is similar, although not exactly the same, to that for Indigenous students.

These commitments mean that students from these groups should have average school outcomes and a range of outcomes which is similar to that of other students. They can be seen as a social equity goal.

Weaker commitment to social equity in education

The Melbourne Declaration contains a weaker commitment to social equity in education than the Adelaide Declaration. It does this in three ways:

- It removes the strong explicit commitment to social justice in schooling contained in the Adelaide Declaration;
- It strengthens the emphasis on equity in access to education and reduces the emphasis on equity in student outcomes; and
- It weakens the commitment to eliminating achievement gaps between students from different social groups.

First, one of the three goals of the Adelaide Declaration was that “schooling should be socially just”. This goal does not appear in the Melbourne Declaration. While several of the commitments under the social justice in schooling goal of the Adelaide Declaration are continued in the Melbourne Declaration, the removal of this goal is symbolic of the overall weaker commitment to equity in education in the new Declaration.

Having social justice in schooling as a key national goal in education was a powerful statement of policy priority. It provided leadership and hope for thousands of teachers, parents and students. It provided a constant benchmark for the evaluation of the performance of governments and their bureaucracies. The fact that they consistently failed this benchmark is perhaps the reason it has been eliminated as a major goal in Australian schools.

Second, the Adelaide Declaration stated that **student outcomes** should be free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination such as those based on sex, ethnicity and socio-economic background. In contrast, the Melbourne Declaration only commits governments to

providing all students with **access** to high quality schooling free from discrimination including, among others, that based on culture and ethnicity. This is a much weaker commitment to equity than that of the Adelaide Declaration.

The Melbourne Declaration has switched emphasis from equity in outcomes to equity in access to education – two entirely different concepts. Equity in access to education is a much weaker commitment than social equity in school outcomes. It fails to specify whether it refers to the outcomes of school or the provision of inputs into the learning process at school.

Equity in access to education is generally interpreted to mean 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 failed to take up the opportunities and it is attributed to their lack of talent or motivation. Those who don't succeed are judged as not capable of succeeding.

Equity in access 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, equity in access to education is a recipe for continuing inequity. It is a fundamentally unjust principle.

Emphasis on equity of access as an education commitment fails to challenge the massive social inequities in education. As a result, these inequalities may be legitimised as the natural order of things.

Third, the Adelaide Declaration stated that the learning outcomes of **all** educationally disadvantaged students should match those of other students. This was a powerful commitment to social equity in education. It meant that average outcomes, the range of outcomes and the distribution of outcomes should be similar for students from different social groups. It did not mean that all children should achieve the same education outcomes only that children from different social groups should achieve similar outcomes.

The Melbourne Declaration commits to eliminating the achievement gap between Indigenous and other students. It says that the learning outcomes of Indigenous students should improve to match those of other students. The Adelaide Declaration made the same commitment.

However, this commitment is not given to other groups of students as it was in the Adelaide Declaration. The Melbourne Declaration fails to commit to eliminating the achievement gaps for other educationally disadvantaged groups.

It states that governments are committed to ensuring that socio-economic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes. While this remains a strong commitment to improved social equity, it is weaker than ensuring that the outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged students should improve to match those of other students as stated in the Adelaide Declaration.

The Melbourne Declaration also provides a much weaker commitment to overcoming other sources of disadvantage in learning, such as that associated with ethnic background and geographical location. It only commits to reducing the effect of other sources of

disadvantage, instead of requiring that they improve to match those of other students. Yet, there are major gaps in achievement between these groups of students and other students. For example, students of Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander backgrounds have lower average outcomes than other students and this is not completely accounted for by socio-economic disadvantage.

It is difficult to understand the reason for this weakened commitment to social equity in education. An earlier draft of the Declaration circulated for consultation with stakeholders included the goal that the learning outcomes of Indigenous and **other** educationally disadvantaged students should improve to match those of other students.

Reporting school results

A key feature of the new Declaration is its commitment to providing information about school performance to inform parent choice of school and public accountability. It states that parents should have access to data that allows them to assess a school's performance overall and in improving student outcomes. It also says that parents should have access to information about a school's enrolment profile.

League tables are inevitable

In effect, the Declaration has given the go ahead for league tables. It states that governments “**will not themselves** devise simplistic league tables or rankings”. The implication is that others will be able to use data on school results to publish league tables.

This is what happens in England. The UK Government publishes alphabetical lists and pages of data on every school in each local education authority and the media turns them into league tables ranked by performance level (for example, see *The Times* http://www.timesonline.co.uk/parentpower/league_tables.php and BBC News http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/7827223.stm). The Guardian publishes a league table of the most improved schools (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/table/2009/jan/15/most-improved-2005-08-gcse-alevel>). The BBC also publishes a list of the worst performing schools in different regions (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/7827214.stm).

League tables increase social segregation and inequity in education

League tables establish a public label of ‘failure’ on some schools which encourages parents to vote with their feet and move to other seemingly more successful schools. The Prime Minister has said that this is what the system is designed to do. The effect is to exacerbate existing education inequities and social segregation in schools.

It is well-off, white families who make greatest use of choice of school. Extensive evidence from several countries shows that the parents who make use of school performance comparisons and actively choose schools are better educated and have higher levels of income than those who do not. Reporting school results serves these higher income families. Finding the “best” schools according to league tables inevitably means those that have the fewest low-income and minority students. Thus, aiding parent choice by reporting school results reinforces tendencies toward racial and economic separation in schools.

A range of studies conclude that socio-economic and/or racial segregation in schools has increased in Chile, Denmark, Great Britain, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the United States over the last decade or so as a result of increased choice and competition in schooling. In many of these systems, choice and competition between schools has been promoted by reporting school results.

This tendency is reinforced by the ability of oversubscribed schools to choose their students. Some schools are able to improve their measured performance at the expense of other schools by 'creaming-off' high achieving students from other schools or, at least, by restricting the entry of students who are likely to achieve poor results. Increased competition tends to re-distribute high achieving students and students from well-off families between schools, thus increasing disparities in school performance.

As the more selective schools siphon off students, the better teachers and associated funding, the unpopular schools become the dumping ground for disadvantaged pupils and demoralised teachers. The result is a two-tier school system - one group of schools for the well-off and the best teachers and another for the least well-off and the least qualified and experienced teachers. This has occurred in England, New Zealand and the United States.

Increased social segregation in schooling can exacerbate inequity in education in two main ways.

First, it increases disparities between schools in student learning needs and the real resources available to meet those needs. Schools with a high proportion of students from low socio-economic (SES) families have higher levels of learning needs and other problems than high SES schools because low income is associated with lower levels of student achievement. In low SES schools, the scale of challenges is much larger because of the greater concentration of students experiencing them is greater. They generally have to devote far more time and resources to family and health crises, children with few educational materials in their homes, and many children with very weak educational preparation.

Generally, the resources available to low SES schools are not commensurate with the problems they face. Low SES schools are generally funded on the same per capita basis as other schools, with few allowances for the level of need they have to deal with. They have less real resources because they have higher costs and burdens.

Second, increasing concentrations of students from low SES and minority families in some schools tend to lead to lower overall outcomes. Many international studies show that there is a school composition effect on student outcomes associated with high proportions of students from low SES and minority families. A student attending a school where the average SES of the student body is low is likely to have lower outcomes than a student from a similar background attending a school where the average SES of the student body is high. Thus, increasing social segregation between schools is likely to reduce average student achievement.

Like-school comparisons are no answer

The Melbourne Declaration says that parents and the community should have information to compare the performance of schools with similar characteristics (so-called 'like-school

comparisons). It assumes that contextual data about schools will overcome the problems associated with league tables.

The publication of like-school comparisons will inevitably lead to comparisons of unlike schools. The existing models of comparing the performance of like schools in New York City, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia do not consistently compare like with like. They all permit comparisons of the performance of unlike schools because of flaws in the way they are constructed.

First, they do not distinguish the ethnic profile of schools. Performance disparities between schools in one group may reflect differences in ethnic composition rather than differences in school practices. For example, there are large disparities in the average results of Lebanese and Pacific Islander students compared to those of Chinese and Indian descent which are obscured by current classifications according to language background.

Second, the NSW and WA models allocate all schools to a small number of like-school groups defined according to a selected range of SES index scores. There may be substantial differences between the SES profile of schools at the higher and lower boundaries of each like-school group. These differences may be greater than those between schools clustered either side of the group boundaries. Schools whose SES scores are close to the arbitrary group boundary may be more like schools in another like-school group than many other schools in their 'home' group.

Third, the measures of SES used to determine like-school groups may create misleading comparisons. For example, the area-based indexes of SES used in NSW and WA do not distinguish between households with and without children at school. Some schools may be classified in a low SES group because there is a large pensioner population in their area, even though families with school-age children may be well-off. Thus, some schools with a relatively large proportion of well-off families may be classified to a low SES school group and their performance compared with other schools which have larger proportions of students from low SES families.

Using individual family data as in Victoria is just as problematic. This approach to determining like-schools is based on income and occupation information provided by parents on school enrolment forms. About 40 per cent families do not comply and these are largely concentrated in the lower SES categories. However, for non-respondents, the student's parent occupation group defaults to the highest level occupation. Thus, some schools with a high proportion of parents from the lower occupational groups may be incorrectly classified as schools with a high proportion of parents from the higher occupational groups and be compared with quite unlike other schools.

Policy contradiction

The new Declaration contains a fatal contradiction. It retains a strong, although weakened, emphasis on improving social equity in education but it extends the quasi-market in education developed under the Howard Government. These are incompatible policies. They pull school systems in different directions and, inevitably, it is equity which suffers.

There is a clear tension between a weakened commitment to improve equity and a stronger commitment to promoting choice and competition between schools. The evidence is that

market-oriented systems undermine the achievement of equity in education. As discussed above, increased social segregation in schooling arising from increased choice and competition promoted by league tables is likely to exacerbate inequity in education.

The attempt to marry the irreconcilable – improving equity while increasing the role of the market in education - is the path of New Labour under the Blair Government in England. There the contradictions between the rhetoric of social justice and social inclusion and promoting competition and choice for privileged choosers have become increasingly obvious. Intervention programmes to assist schools serving disadvantaged communities have been re-packaged constantly in the face of continuing poor results in these schools as market enhancing policies continue to create social inequalities and injustice. This has been compounded by the strategy of closing schools that do not improve performance, the ultimate in blaming the victims as the schools that are closed are those that serve low income and ethnic communities.

Astoundingly, Australian governments have chosen to follow the example of school systems that generally perform less well than Australian systems while ignoring the example of school systems that perform better. OECD studies show that the countries with the highest levels of student achievement generally make less use of comparisons of school results. For example, the two of the highest performing countries – Finland and Korea – do not even have large scale national testing programs and do not report the results of individual schools. In contrast, the two countries that make the greatest use of school comparisons – the United Kingdom and the United States – consistently perform well below Australia.

The Federal Education Minister says that it is appropriate to look to the UK and the US rather than Finland because the socio-demographic composition of the former is less homogeneous than Finland. While the observation is correct, it misses the key point. Socio-economic background is the key contributing factor to differences in student achievement. Finland is a market economy. This is reflected in its occupation and income structure which is broadly similar to that of Australia, the UK, the US and other market economies in that it contains a large proportion of lower income families and people employed in lower status occupations. Indeed, there is evidence that income inequality has increased in Finland over the past 20 years as it has become more integrated into the international economy. However, Finland has been much more successful than other countries in reducing the impact of socio-economic background on student results and, as a result, has the lowest achievement gap between rich and poor students in the world. For this reason, Finland provides an international benchmark for improving equity in education.

In the face of this evidence, the extraordinary decision by Australian governments, led by the Rudd Government, to extend the market in education can only indicate a commitment to ideology rather than evidence-based policy making. The Melbourne Declaration is based on the false premise that the extension of quasi-markets in education is compatible with improving equity in education. These contradictory policies will not work any better in Australia than they have in England or the United States. It means that the large achievement gap between students from high and low income families will remain and possibly widen.