



Review of the Melbourne Declaration

Joint Submission

Background

1. What are your expectations of a national aspirational declaration on Australian education?

A revised national declaration should explicitly state that all children should be provided with the opportunity to develop strong literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills. All young Australians should have the chance to become successful learners who are literate and numerate and who are taught using evidence-based, best-practice approaches to teaching and learning. The National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (NITL, 2005) concluded that teacher education is critical in this regard, and must include increased time spent on reading instruction, in addition to improvements in pre-service preparation and school practice. Although this report was written in 2005, we are yet to see a meaningful response to it.

The foundational importance of literacy and numeracy to education and whole-of-life outcomes cannot be overstated. Australia's achievements in this domain are currently of significant concern. Recent results from PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment) indicated that one-third of Australian 15 year-olds had low reading proficiency levels and were therefore unable to read at the level required to meet real-life challenges. In addition, findings from the Australian Industry Group indicated that 99 per cent of companies providing employment across the construction, mining and service industries reported that low levels of literacy and numeracy were affecting their businesses. Jobs for unskilled workers are declining and there will be increased demand for skilled, knowledgeable and competent employees. It is essential that the declaration focuses on the importance of strong reading, writing and mathematics as the workforce of the future will require higher levels of literacy and numeracy skills than has ever been the case before.

A strong foundation in literacy and numeracy is largely dependent on the capacity of teachers to provide expert instruction in these areas. In terms of literacy instruction, the declaration should outline the need for teachers to understand the science of reading and to be experts in the delivery of high-quality instruction for all children and evidence-based intervention for those who struggle. We know more now than ever before about the cognitive and linguistic processes implicit in learning to read, write and calculate. Excellence in instruction must be informed by the increasing body of research and knowledge available to schools and universities. It is essential that initial instruction in reading and writing includes: explicit teaching in phonemic awareness, structured synthetic phonics, fluency development, vocabulary and language comprehension.

A national declaration should emphasise the importance of high-quality instruction and the acquisition of strong knowledge across the curriculum. It should not focus on the mistaken belief that education in the 21st century is in some way fundamentally different to education in

the past. Although it is obviously important to ensure that current and future students are creative, innovative and effective problem-solvers; this can only occur if they are literate, numerate and have a deep and rich knowledge of the world in which they live.

Finally, a national declaration should outline high expectations for teachers and students. An expectation of excellence in education gives teachers and students a standard to aspire to. Research suggests that the students of teachers who have high expectations show larger achievement gains and make more progress. Those with the view that different students progress along 'different pathways' frequently allow the most disadvantaged students to fall further and further behind.

2. Who should the national declaration inspire and/or guide?

We believe that the national declaration should inspire and/or guide:

Students

Teachers

Parents

Government

Policy Makers

Universities involved in teacher training

Q2a. In your view, what should the declaration do for students / teachers / parents / governments / policy makers?

The declaration should support and inspire students, inform and include parents and guide and empower teachers. It should foster a system of education that provides all students with the opportunity to succeed at the highest levels and choose from a range of desirable employment or training pathways, regardless of socio-economic status. It should result in governments and policy makers being held, at least to some degree, accountable for the decisions they make. In order for this to occur, the statements of intent contained in the declaration should be explicit and measurable.

The declaration should highlight the critical importance of strong literacy and numeracy skills and emphasise the need for: early high-quality instruction in foundation-level skills; and, the ongoing development of reading, writing and mathematical abilities. These foundation skills deserve significant attention as there is a considerable body of evidence to indicate that the range of achievement at each year level is broadening with an ever-increasing tail of underachievement. An analysis of NAPLAN data indicates that the high-achieving students in a typical Year 9 class can be more than seven years ahead of the low-achieving students. Remarkably, a year 9 student may meet the minimum standard set on the NAPLAN tests, even if they are reading below the level of a typical year 5 student.

In addition, it is important to recognise that the reading and maths skills of Australian students have declined over time (see OECD's Programme for International Assessment). In the time since the Melbourne Declaration was made, the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian students have

dropped, with reading literacy declining by 16 points and mathematical literacy declining by 29 points in the period from 2000 to 2012. In the same period, Germany increased its literacy level by 24 points (McDougall, 2016). The impact of low literacy and numeracy skills on businesses have also increased in recent years, according to employers (Australian Industry Group, 2016)

The declaration should outline the essential foundations of education in order to ensure that all stakeholders are working from a common ground to improve student achievement.

In order for teachers to capably and confidently meet these expectations, teacher training must also follow these principles – be evidence-based, underpinned by deep knowledge and a solid understanding of the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy instruction. Research by John Hattie (2003) indicated that teaching quality accounts for 30 per cent of the variance in student performance. All teachers should leave university teacher training being able to teach children how to read, spell, write and calculate. This is not currently the case.

3. How has the *Melbourne Declaration* impacted or influenced you?

Rate from 1 (No impact) to 5 (Very big impact)

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The Australia Federation of SPELD Associations (AUSPELD) represents all state and territory SPELD Associations. Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties. AUSPELD and LDA represent and support the many thousands of children and adults struggling with both learning difficulties and Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) throughout Australia. Elements of the Melbourne Declaration have been important to the direction and content of policies and programs in the field of education in which AUSPELD and LDA work.

Changes since the Melbourne Declaration

Q4. What are the most important economic, social and technological changes that are already shaping and will continue to shape the future of education in Australia? * Choose at least 5

- Labour market polarisation
- Globalisation
- Trend towards multiple careers
- Inequality of access to education
- Changes to education delivery, for example, greater online delivery of classes
- Better evaluation of teaching practice / pedagogy
- Other (please specify):
 - Mistaken belief that what children need to know and learn is going to be fundamentally different in the 21st century. (It has been suggested that rather than knowledge – students need to be taught to problem-solve and to be innovative and creative. The fact is that without domain-specific knowledge, students cannot solve problems or arrive at innovative solutions!)
 - The erroneous view that due to access to information through the internet, strong foundation skills are not as necessary as they were in the past.

Q5. How can a national declaration best reflect that Australians need to continue to participate in learning throughout their lifetime?

Evidence shows that one million children are at risk of reading failure and this can have a serious negative influence on their quality of life and for the long-term future of Australian society (Hempenstall, 2016). The emphasis of the declaration should be on preparing students to be lifelong learners through the development of strong foundation skills and a deep and rich general knowledge about the world in which we live. Developing good literacy and numeracy skills in school allows students to access knowledge and information in the future. A solid knowledge base of fundamental principles across learning areas also prepares students for future learning.

These essential skills and a deep knowledge will serve to prepare students for the 21st century far better than attempting to teach creativity and problem-solving in isolation. Although these areas are important, students will be unable to think creatively and confidently unless they have strong language skills and knowledge to draw on.

Lifelong learning is necessary for students across all socioeconomic levels. The national declaration should aim to “narrow the gap” for disadvantaged students by focusing on evidence-based approaches to support students at risk of failure. It is unfortunately the case that students from backgrounds of disadvantage are significantly more likely to achieve at lower levels on measures of literacy and numeracy than students from more advantaged backgrounds. This is not always the case, however, with examples of schools in low SES areas outperforming schools in high SES areas. A number of commonalities across high performing schools in areas of disadvantage have been identified. These include: a pro-active approach to school discipline, direct and explicit instruction, experienced and autonomous school leadership, data-informed practice, teacher collaboration and professional learning, and comprehensive early reading instruction (including the provision of a structured phonics program; Joseph, 2019).

By providing all Australian students with a strong foundation in oral language, literacy and numeracy, we provide them with the tools that will enable and encourage them to participate in learning throughout their lifetime.

Q5a. Please rate the importance of each of the following sectors in the next declaration?

Rate from 1 = Not Important to 4 = Critically Important

Early Childhood **4**

School Years **4**

Vocational Education and Training **3**

University **3**

Higher Education **3**

Formal Learning Later in Life **3**

Q5b. Are there any other important sectors to consider for the next declaration?

Educational Goals for Young Australians

Q6. Will the two goals in the Melbourne Declaration continue to be relevant over the next ten years?

YES / NO

Q6b. What does the concept of equity look like in education?

- In order to achieve equity in education we must focus on the effective inclusion of **all** children in daily high-quality teaching; ensure those students who begin to fall behind their peers have access to additional small-group intervention; and provide targeted intervention for individual children requiring intensive support. In all cases, the instruction needs to be delivered by well-trained knowledgeable teachers.
- Equity means ensuring that disadvantaged students (including students with disability, those from backgrounds of disadvantage/regional or remote areas/ESL or EALD backgrounds) are appropriately catered for through specialised teacher training, sufficient resourcing, improved identification and appropriate support.

Q6c. What does the concept of excellence look like in education?

Excellence in education includes:

- High expectations for staff and students – excellence is expected regardless of student background;
- High quality teaching based on evidence regarding what works including explicit instruction and the modelling of excellence by teachers;
- Outstanding teacher training which provides capable and confident teachers who can provide high quality instruction in literacy and numeracy;
- Students' development of foundation literacy and numeracy instruction; and,
- Creating a lifelong passion for learning through knowledge acquisition and skill development.

The Melbourne Declaration lists attributes young Australians should have under the following categories:

- Successful learners
- Confident and creative individuals
- Active and informed citizens

Q6d. What words would you use to describe these attributes in a contemporary declaration?

Learners who are:

- Knowledgeable – who have an understanding of the world in which we live.
- Proficient – who have learned the knowledge and skills to allow them to progress through education.
- Confident – who are given opportunities to succeed in a high expectation environment.
- Fluent readers – who can access knowledge across subject areas and disciplines effortlessly. Well-developed reading skills improve academic abilities as well as social skills such as empathy and compassion.

Areas for Action

Q7. For each of the following areas for action, please identify if it is still contemporary?

Rate as “Not at all contemporary” or “Still contemporary”

- Develop stronger partnerships **Still contemporary**
- Supporting quality teaching and school leadership **Still contemporary**
- Strengthening early childhood education **Still contemporary**
- Enhancing middle years development **Still contemporary**
- Supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions **Still contemporary**
- Promoting world class curriculum and assessment **Still contemporary**
- Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds **Still contemporary**
- Strengthening accountability and transparency **Still contemporary**

Q7a. For each of the following areas for action, please rate how well the area for action addresses the two goals in the *Melbourne Declaration*?

Rate as: No longer addresses either goal; Addresses goal 1 only; Addresses goal 2 only; Still addresses both goals.

- Develop stronger partnerships **Still addresses both goals**
- Supporting quality teaching and school leadership **Still addresses both goals**
- Strengthening early childhood education **Still addresses both goals**
- Enhancing middle years development **Still addresses both goals**
- Supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions **Still addresses both goals**
- Promoting world class curriculum and assessment **Still addresses both goals**
- Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds **Still addresses both goals**
- Strengthening accountability and transparency **Still addresses both goals**

Q8i. Are there any new priority areas for action that could be added to the national declaration to address the goals?

New priority area: Ensuring proficiency in literacy and numeracy.

By developing this knowledge early (the ability to read, write and work with number in an accurate and effortless way), students free up the cognitive space needed to explore, invent and be creative. Currently, one-third of Western Australia school students are not proficient, which means they are highly likely to fall further and further behind their peers.

This is a critically important area for action. A significant proportion of students reach the end of secondary school without adequate literacy and numeracy skills. This undermines the ability of young people to access further training and education, or to perform in the workplace.

Q8ia. Rate how well this new Area for Action would address the two goals in the *Melbourne Declaration*?

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Mechanisms to Achieve the Educational Goals

Q9. What is the best way to continue to measure and track progress towards achieving the goals?

It is of extreme importance that we continue to have a set of expectations and goals for students to reach at every year level – not a model that encourages different pathways (and goals) for different students. Returning to such a model significantly increases the chances of children who are already disadvantaged falling further behind their peers. Having clear expectations (including minimum standards and measures of proficiency) makes educational goals clear to teachers, students and parents, and ensures that no child is left behind.

Q10. How can we ensure the education sector works together to achieve the goals of the Declaration?

In order for the education sector to achieve the goals of the declaration, there needs to be communication and collaboration between peak bodies (such as AUSPELD and LDA), universities, policy makers, government, schools and families.