

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

Advice to: Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) National Goals Project

Topic: Response to the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians - Draft

Date due: 3 October 2008

Thank you for inviting comment from the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) on the draft of the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Educational Goals). The Commission supports the development of new Educational Goals and welcomes MCEETYA's commitment to improve educational attainment and outcomes for all young people in Australia.

The Commission acknowledges that MCEETYA's redevelopment of the Educational Goals is taking place in conjunction with the national framework for education reform, being led by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)¹. This provides a significant and timely opportunity to restate and clarify the Educational Goals so they can provide direction and guide educational settings in achieving educational reform.

One of the guiding Principles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the Convention) is that children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that impact on their lives. This Principle recognises that children's views can enrich decision-making processes that are relevant to their lived experiences.²

The updating of the National Goals provides an opportunity to commit seriously to engaging with children and young people, in compliance with the Convention, to gain their perspectives on education. Considering and appropriately acting on their views is important in assisting all students, but particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged, to be motivated and engaged in learning.

Summary of Commission's recommendations

1. The Educational Goals be made more reader-friendly with a format that produces clear signposts to outline the key elements and include a statement of the Principles that underpin the achievement of the Educational Goals.
2. Students be explicitly mentioned as one of the groups with whom engagement should occur in section 3a.
3. Identify links with National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care
4. There be a stronger emphasis on information and communication technology (ICT) in the Educational Goals and that along with literacy and numeracy, ICT be considered a core basic skill for all students and embedded throughout the curriculum and be included as an eighth dot point to be included in the section, 'Learning Areas *Disciplines*'.
5. Identify children and young people in alternative or out-of-home care in the categories of disadvantaged young Australians.
6. Integrated service delivery be included as a central aspect of the actions that will improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from Indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds.

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The Commission supports many of the comments and approaches in the document. These include:

Section 3c. Supporting effective transitions

The Commission strongly supports the proposal to place a particular emphasis on collaboration during transition phases at critical and risky times. Maintaining engagement for all students throughout their involvement with the educational system is a necessary prerequisite for achieving the Educational Goals.

Section 3d. Improving the quality of teaching and school leadership

The Commission agrees that this area of collaboration will be crucial in achieving the Educational Goals for all Australian students, but especially for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and for all other vulnerable and educationally disadvantaged students.

Recruiting and retaining the nation's best and most innovative teachers to teach the most educationally disadvantaged students will be the main lever to lift educational outcomes for this vulnerable group. As the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd and Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, outlined in *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools*, redressing disadvantage will be important in lifting the educational outcomes for all students.

Section 3e. Developing world-class curriculum and assessment

The Commission agrees that assessment is important and should have multifaceted purposes, as outlined in the draft Educational Goals. However, it is also a Commission concern that there may be a proposal to introduce more national testing, over and above the current Program for Student International Assessment (PISA) and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing agreement. An over-emphasis on, 'rigorous testing (including national level testing)' could have a negative impact on the achievement of the Educational Goals. Formal testing can create anxiety for some students and place pressure on teachers to 'teach to the test', neither of these outcomes will assist in achieving the Educational Goals.

Section 3g. Increasing accountability and transparency

The Commission supports the aim of parents and students being able to track individual, school and system performance in meaningful ways.

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Recommends changes

1. The Educational Goals be made more reader-friendly with a format that produces clear signposts to outline the key elements, including a statement of the Principles that underpin the achievement of the Educational Goals.

The Educational Goals document contains useful and important information, however, in its current format, the goals are not clear and the most salient points are not highlighted.

The Educational Goals needs to be a more succinct and reader-friendly document that includes clearly signposted key elements. The intended audience for the document needs to be determined and the content, format and style tailored to this audience/s. If the intention is to provide broad direction for all educational settings it needs to be written in a way that teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders can easily identify the Educational Goals. For example, the document design should make it possible for the key elements to be able to be readily condensed into a handy reference one-page poster format, similar to the previous Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century.

Section 1. Preamble

The Commission suggests the preamble be condensed and confined to setting out the educational challenges that Australia faces as it moves forward into the next decade. A statement of the Principles that underpin the achievement of the Educational Goals should be provided. For example, the Principle that education should encompass the development of the whole child and nurture children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical and spiritual development should be clearly stated. A recognition of the importance of focussing on the whole child was included in the Preamble of the previous Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling.

The Principle of equity is also important to highlight. Two stated priority areas, improving outcomes for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and closing the gap between educational outcomes for Indigenous students and other students, are directly related to the Principle of equity.

Section 2. Our educational goals for young Australians

The goals need to be stated clearly, easily identified and their intent understood by the reader of the document, similar to the previous Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century. In this current document it is difficult to distinguish between goals, statements, commitments and observations.

Some of the goals in the current draft Educational Goals document need to be updated. For example, the goal that students should have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy as a foundation for success in all learning areas should be updated to include ICT. If Australia is to provide a world-class education system that equips students with the skills and abilities to succeed in a time of ongoing globalisation and technological change, then ICT skills should be a core skill, along with competent literacy and numeracy skills.

Another example is the goal that students have a sense of optimism, self-esteem and are able to manage their emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. This goal should be

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updated to include the important co-requisite to a 'sense of optimism' and that is 'resilience' or the ability to cope with life's disappointments. Also the term 'healthy self-esteem' is preferable to the term 'self-esteem', as it is possible to have an excessive or unrealistic self-esteem, which is not a desirable outcome for individuals or the nation.

Section 3. A commitment to action: collective responsibility for personalised learning

The Commission is unclear as to the precise meaning and intent of the phrase, 'collective responsibility for personalised learning', and is therefore of the view that this phrase should either be avoided or explained more clearly.

Section 3e. Developing world-class curriculum and assessment

The Commission also suggests that the following section under this goal (p.10) (shaded in blue) be deleted as it introduces what appear to be further educational goals and is confusing for the reader:

'State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments commit to working together with all school sectors to develop world-class curriculum in Australia that enables every student to develop:

- a solid foundation in skills and knowledge on which further learning and adult life can be built (*and the accompanying paragraph*)
- deep knowledge and skills that will enable advanced learning and an ability to create new ideas and translate them into practical applications (*and the accompanying paragraph*)
- general capabilities that underpin flexible and critical thinking, a capacity to work with others and an ability to move across subject disciplines to develop new expertise' (*and the accompanying paragraph*)

The content of this section is already covered in, *Section 2. Our educational goals for young Australians.*

Multidisciplinary perspectives

This section (p. 11) is ambiguous and not well connected to the key elements. This section, with the following dot points should be deleted or more clearly explained and better integrated into the document:

- ICT;
- design and creativity;
- civics and citizenship;
- environmental sustainability; and
- business.

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2. Students be explicitly mentioned as one of the groups with whom engagement should occur

Section 3a Developing stronger partnerships with parents, the community and business

The Commission supports the development of genuine partnerships and the commitment to working with and engaging with all school sectors, however, a significant omission is the need to engage with students. While engaging with students is mentioned in the last sentence of the preamble, it is not addressed explicitly elsewhere in the document.

The Commission is strongly of the view that students should be identified as one of the groups in section 3a for example, *Developing stronger partnerships with **students**, parents, the community and business.*

The text under this heading should include a paragraph on the importance of formally engaging with students to obtain their views to influence decisions about the education they are receiving. The process of formally engaging with students will provide insights and information about what is and is not working for students from a perspective that cannot be gained elsewhere.

Many educational institutions already have specific processes that give a voice to young people, however it is important to formally recognise this in the Educational Goals as a prompt for those settings that have not yet implemented specific engagement processes.

Even very young children involved in the early childhood education and care system have been able to provide researchers, teachers and carers feedback on both their positive and negative feelings and thoughts about the services they attend³. Feedback and suggestions from students themselves should form part of a comprehensive ongoing evaluative program that monitors the progress of the implementation of the Educational Goals over time.

It is also important that students' views are not only seriously considered, but also appropriately acted upon to improve educational outcomes for children and young people. It is essential that all educational institutions are able to engage students in meaningful learning and in ways that avoid the dangers of students becoming disengaged and prematurely exiting formal education.

3. Identify links with National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

Section 3b. Strengthening early childhood education

The Commission agrees that early childhood education is an area that would be greatly enhanced by improved collaboration. The Commission recommends that this section of the Educational Goals should contain a reference to COAG's proposed development of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care as the success of the COAG reforms aimed at improving and strengthening the early childhood education and care system will be fundamental to achieving the national Educational Goals.

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4. There be a stronger emphasis on information and communication technology (ICT) in the Educational Goals and that along with literacy and numeracy, ICT be considered a core basic skill for all students and embedded throughout the curriculum and be included as an eighth dot point to be included in the section, 'Learning Areas Disciplines'.

The Commission supports the development of a world-class curriculum and assessment for all Australian students and recommends that to help achieve this an eighth dot point, 'Information and Communication Technology' be included in the section, 'Learning Areas *Disciplines*' on page ten.

Information and communication technology skills, combined with literacy and numeracy, are core educational skills that every young Australian should gain basic proficiency in as a result of their schooling experience.

5. Identify children in alternative or out-of-home care in the categories of disadvantaged young Australians

The Commission supports the commitment *Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from Indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds*, in particular the promise to 'make a significant investment' to help all young Australians achieve equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes. As well as the categories students identified as disadvantaged (p. 11) the Commission recommends that children who are placed in alternative or out-of-home care be identified as a disadvantaged group as the educational outcomes for children in alternative care are consistently lower than for the general population.*⁴

6. Integrated service delivery be included as a central aspect of the actions that will improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from Indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds.

To help improve outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from Indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds, educational services need to be linked to other initiatives and services focussing on prevention and early intervention, housing, health and family support. This could be included in *section 3f, Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from Indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds*

The Commission commends the commitment to provide additional support to disadvantaged students and focus on school improvement in low socio-economic communities. The needs of educationally disadvantaged students are often complex and require both additional support within the educational service they attend and supplementary support that is beyond the resources and expertise of an educational setting. Such support may include wider family support from agencies that operate independently from the education sector.

* The educational outcomes for children in alternative care are consistently lower than for the general population, as shown by national literacy and numeracy benchmarks results in 2006. Cited in, Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2008). *Snapshot 2008: Children and young people in Queensland*. Brisbane: Author.

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Recently COAG has been leading a number of reform initiatives in areas that have the potential to be of great assistance in achieving the educational goals. The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children; the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care; 'Closing the Gap' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the national reform of the vocational education and training sector are initiatives that are directly related to the achievement of the Educational Goals. Educational services are a key area that should be linked to other initiatives and services focussing on prevention and early intervention, housing, health and family support.

Service 'hubs' that are directly connected to early childhood education and care settings, schools and other educational services could be a vital link in the provision of services and holistic support for vulnerable students. Initiatives such as, Café Enfield in South Australia, illustrate what is possible with coordinated prevention oriented services that are linked to educational settings. Providing more support for vulnerable students and families through linked-up service 'hubs' would also enable teachers and schools to spend more time on their core business of education and less time struggling to provide more general social service support services for disadvantaged children.

The Commission commends the commitment to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous children and young people as a key component of the educational goals and the recognition that additional targeted support is required. Some of the strategies that have been identified in a Commission's consultation issues paper⁵ exploring ways to overcome educational disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include the following:

- targeted language programs in early childhood settings for students who start school with limited understanding of English
- actively respecting and celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in schools
- encouraging and welcoming the involvement of parents and families in school-life and decision-making
- the training of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and teacher aides
- providing accessible advice in secondary school on subject selection, goal setting and future career pathways

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References

- ¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2008). *Quality Education: The case for an Education Revolution in our Schools*. Canberra: Author.
- ² UNICEF, Convention on the Rights of the Child Factsheet: 'The Right to Participation', <http://www.unicef.org/crc/filesRight-to-Participation.pdf>
- ³ Farrell, A., Tayler, C. and Tennent, L. (2002). *Early childhood services: what can children tell us?* Australian Journal of Early Childhood, Vol. 27.
- ⁴ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2008). *Snapshot 2008: Children and young people in Queensland*. Brisbane: Author.
- ⁵ Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian. (2007) *Winning the Game of Life: Overcoming educational disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland*. Issues Paper 1. Brisbane Author.