

**Supplementary Submission on the Draft
National Declaration on Educational Goals for
Young Australians**

Save Our Schools

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<http://www.soscanberra.com/>

Submission

1. Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians

Save Our Schools welcomes the incorporation of the social equity goal to ensure that learning outcomes for Indigenous and other educationally disadvantaged students come to match those of other students. However, there is an inconsistency between the goal and the commitment to action that should be corrected.

Specifically, there is a commitment to ‘close the gap’ for Indigenous children and young people but there is no similar commitment to closing the achievement gap for other disadvantaged young Australians, only a commitment to provide additional support to disadvantaged students.

Save Our Schools believes that the case to close the achievement gap for other disadvantaged young Australians is similar to that for Indigenous students, especially given the National Goal to ensure that learning outcomes for those students should come to match those of other students. It recommends that the commitment to action should include a commitment to “close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students”.

Recommendation

Under Section f (p.12) replace current dot point 2 with:

- ‘close the gap’ for disadvantaged students

2. Increasing accountability and transparency

The current draft provides for reports on school performance that report student achievement. This is an extremely vague commitment which could lead to the introduction of forms of reporting on school performance that undermine the social equity goal, provide misleading and inaccurate information to parents and the public and unfairly stigmatise disadvantaged schools, students and families.

Save Our Schools considers that the National Declaration should include some clear principles to ensure that reporting on school performance does not lead to such problems.

School reporting should distinguish between the influence of school and non-school factors on school performance

Reports on school performance should be designed in recognition that student achievement is influenced by factors outside the control of teachers and schools. School outcomes are not determined by classroom teaching alone. They are influenced by other factors including student absenteeism, the extent of parent involvement in learning at home, the extent to which students are engaged in after-hours tutoring and the socio-economic, ethnic and Indigenous characteristics of the school community.

Reports on school performance that fail to take account of these other influences on student achievement can seriously mislead parents and the public about a school’s

performance. As far as possible, reports on school performance should reflect the 'value added' by the school.

School reporting should preclude publication of league tables

Summary measures of student achievement by school should not be reported in such a way as to facilitate the construction and publication of league tables of school performance. League tables are likely to:

- mislead judgements about school performance because they fail to take account of non-school factors influencing student achievement and because they fail to take account of measurement and sampling error;
- lead to a public debasement of schools with very poor results and a low ranking, and to public labelling of their students and families as 'failures';
- encourage greater education inequities and social segregation of schools as high ranking schools select 'good' students and reject 'poor' students, while the best teachers move to the high ranking schools;
- provide incentives to manipulate school outcomes by cheating and excluding low achieving students from tests by suspending them or encouraging absenteeism on test days.

League tables also tend to undermine school improvement efforts because they may:

- distort curriculum by reducing time and resources devoted to student learning in curriculum areas and experiences not subject to standardised tests;
- distort teaching devoting more time and resources to students who are close to reporting benchmarks at the expense of both high achieving and very low achieving students;
- discourage collaboration between schools around improved strategies and practices;
- promote increased focus on school image rather than school improvement; and
- discourage parents from seeing themselves as partners in schooling and promote a divisive relationship between parents and schools rather than a collaborative approach to learning.

So-called 'value-added' league tables also tend to provide similar incentives.

School reporting should not stigmatise students, families or schools

Reporting school performance, especially as league tables, can easily lead to a system of public blame and labels of 'failure' on schools, which may undermine teaching and learning in some schools. In these circumstances, it amounts to a public punishment system that creates a climate of recrimination and retribution.

Rather than support improved student learning and school improvement, school performance reporting can lead to a spiral of decline. Students who are humiliated for their learning accomplishments are unlikely to respond positively in their future learning. They could become alienated from schooling and, possibly, from their peers and their community as well. The task of schools will be made harder.

Thus, it is important that reporting school performance be done in such a way as to support rather than hinder student learning and school improvement.

School reporting should be statistically valid and reliable

Reports on school performance should be statistically valid and reliable so as not to mislead parents and the public. School results on standardised achievement tests are subject to measurement and sampling error. Failure to report measurement error can lead to the creation of non-existent differences between schools.

Measures of school performance based on standardised tests typically have a margin of error or uncertainty associated with them because they are based on a sample of students and because of test unreliability. The uncertainty intervals for many – indeed, probably most schools – will overlap, making their results statistically indistinguishable from each other, except for extreme results.

Many studies of school performance reporting in England, the US and Australia have shown that a large proportion of school results are statistically indistinguishable when measurement error is taken into account. The problem is magnified for measures of student progress, or ‘value added’ comparisons, where measurement error is inevitably larger.

A particular problem is comparing results from one year to the next. School results can be highly volatile from one year to the next as a result of random factors rather than real changes in performance. Indeed, there is international research to suggest that 50 to 80 percent of the year-to-year fluctuations in average school test scores are random and have nothing to do with school quality. School comparisons of progress over one year are therefore highly unreliable and it is misleading to judge actual performance on this basis.

Small schools are much more likely to report large changes in average results from one year to the next, both positive and negative. The results of schools can be heavily influenced by the results of 4 or 5 students in schools with small numbers of students in each year level tested and by the transfer of students between schools.

Consequently, school performance will be more accurately measured as an average over several years. This suggests that measures of school performance should be presented as moving averages of four or five years or average improvement over several years.

Recommendations

That the section on increasing accountability and transparency incorporate principles to guide school performance reporting so that it supports student learning and school improvement rather than undermine it.

That these principles should include the following:

- **Reports on school performance should be designed in recognition that student achievement is influenced by factors outside the control of teachers and schools. As far as possible, reports on school performance should reflect the ‘value added’ by the school.**
- **Summary measures of student achievement by school should not be reported in such a way as to facilitate the construction and publication of league tables of school performance.**

- **School performance reporting should not stigmatize students, families or schools.**
- **Measures used to report school performance should be statistically valid and reliable and measurement error estimates should be reported.**