

A Vision for 2020: Achieve Equity in Education

*A Contribution to Public Discussion of the 2020 Summit Ideas
by
Save our Schools – the national independent advocacy group
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1. The priority is to improve equity in education

Education is central to the future of all Australians. It is fundamental for all Australians to have a successful adult life and to participate fully in adult society. Principles of fairness and social justice demand that children from different social backgrounds have an equal start in adult life. A vision for 2020 should be to achieve equity in education.

While Australia has high average education outcomes it is far from achieving equity in education.

First, a significant proportion of young Australians do not receive an adequate education. Over 30% of all students do not complete Year 12. About 13-14% of 15 year-old students do not achieve expected international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science.

Second, there are large achievement gaps between students from low and high socio-economic status (SES) families and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

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.

Increasing the proportion of all children who receive an adequate education and reducing the large achievement gaps between rich and poor students and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students should be fundamental goals in Australian education to 2020.

In essence, the challenge remains to achieve the National Goals for Schooling all Australian Ministers of Education signed up for in 1999.

2. The National Goals for Schooling set the standard

The National Goals for Schooling incorporate dual equity objectives.

First, 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 and in numeracy and literacy. Goal 3 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 stated as a “minimum standard” or “adequate” level of education to be achieved by all students. It can be termed the “adequacy” objective.

The second equity objective is that schooling be socially just. Goal 3 also requires that student outcomes are free from the effect of negative forms of discrimination and are free of differences arising from students’ socio-economic background or geographical location. In addition, it requires that the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students and Indigenous students improve and that, over time, they match those of other students. This objective may be stated as the “social equity” objective.

But Australia has made little to no progress towards meeting the National Goals for Schooling since 1999.

Too many students are still not achieving an adequate education and there are large achievement gaps between students from low and high SES families and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students which have not been reduced; indeed, they have increased in some instances.

3. All children should receive an adequate education

It is a matter of justice that all children should receive a minimum formal education required to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to society. Society has a moral obligation to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Indeed, the moral authority of a society that calls itself a democracy depends, in no small part, on providing all its citizens with an adequate education.

It is also in society’s interest to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Social waste is incurred if some children do not receive an adequate education. It means that human talents that could contribute to society are not fostered. All children have talents that can be realised through education and formal learning. By failing to develop those talents, society incurs lost opportunities for its development and enrichment.

Further social waste is incurred by the long-term social and financial costs to a society of inadequate education. The social costs of inadequate education are high in that those who are not able to participate socially and economically in society generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security. Inadequate education for some leads to large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of such public services as health care, criminal justice, and public assistance.

In today’s society, an adequate education means successful completion of Year 12 or its equivalent. Those who do not complete Year 12 are to a large extent cut off from further education and training and have limited future employment prospects. All students should complete Year 12 to gain the knowledge and skills they require to enter the workforce or to go on to further education in TAFE or university. This also means that the school system should ensure that all children make satisfactory progress through their school years in order to successfully complete Year 12.

4. Students from different social groups should achieve similar education outcomes

Social equity in education means that students from different social groups should have a similar range of education outcomes. It does not mean that all children should achieve the same education outcomes; instead, the focus of social equity is the comparative performance of students from different social backgrounds.

Large disparities in education outcomes mean that what social group an individual is 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.

In a democracy, education outcomes should not depend on family background and wealth. We 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.

There is no reason in principle to consider that innate talents, motivation and effort to succeed in schooling are distributed differently between the children of different races, ethnic backgrounds or socio-economic background. No social or racial group is innately more intelligent or talented than others.

Thus, continuing differential access to education according to family background is unjust and entrenches inequality and systematic discrimination in our society.

Improving social equity in education outcomes can contribute to reducing social inequality and injustice. 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. In terms of the National Goals for Schooling, student outcomes would still not be “free” of differences arising from different backgrounds and outcomes for low SES students would not necessarily “match” the outcomes of other students.

Even similar average outcomes between students from different backgrounds are not a sufficient condition for social equity in education because the range of outcomes for low SES students as a group could be much larger than that for high SES students. Moreover, even if the range of outcomes and the mean were the same for each group, the distribution of outcomes could be entirely different. For example, the low SES group of students could have a greater number of students clustered below the mean and the high SES group could have a greater number of students clustered above the mean. In any of these circumstances, student outcomes would not be “free” of the effects of different student backgrounds and the outcomes for the low SES group of students would not “match” those of the high SES students.

The social equity goal of the National Goals for Schooling clearly involves a stronger equity concept than all students, or some high proportion of them, achieving a minimum standard. Social equity in education requires that the range and distribution of outcomes be the same for each group of students from different social backgrounds. It is clearly not being achieved across Australia.

5. Towards a Blueprint for Action

An action plan to achieve greater equity in education has to be broad in scope. While it should focus on education improvement, it has to acknowledge that there are a range of factors beyond schools that influence school outcomes. Economic and social factors are important factors in education. Early childhood experiences have a significant influence on school education.

In broad terms, the priority of a Blueprint for Action should be to improve education outcomes for the children of families in the bottom 30% of the SES scale and for Indigenous students. This would contribute much to ensuring that all children receive an adequate education and to significantly reducing the achievement gap.

5.1 Economic and social policies

Employment is fundamental to family wellbeing and the secure development of young people, particularly in terms of remuneration and opportunity for self-development and social interaction. Having a job leads to improved incomes for families, which in turn has a positive influence on education. Government economic policy should be directed at providing greater employment opportunities for families, training programs for the long-term unemployment, opportunities for adult education and further training.

It is also critical that appropriate social welfare and community support services are available and accessed by families and young people in need. Government social policies and programs should be effective in providing access to health services, housing and other community services needed to support families and individuals in stress and circumstances which lead their children to be at risk of not achieving an adequate education.

A Blueprint for Action should be to ensure that policies and programs are in place to:

- increase labour force participation and employment for families of young people at risk;
- support the general welfare, health, mental health, adequate housing, and nutrition of families and young people at risk;
- ensure access to appropriate community-based programs for young people at risk.

5.2 Early childhood development

Early childhood experiences have a significant influence on health and educational outcomes later in life. Health, growth and development in the early years play a crucial role in later outcomes. Deprivation, stress and neglect in these years can have significant impacts on later childhood and adult health and educational outcomes.

It is critical that comprehensive early childhood support policies and programs are in place and accessible for families, especially those in financial stress. Early childhood support programs should also target whole communities that are experiencing disadvantage.

Sometimes overlooked, health services (including dental, nutritional, mental, and physical health) are critical to fostering children's development and are an essential component of quality early care and education programs. For example, research shows that children who experience learning difficulties often have hearing, sight, nutritional or other health problems. It is important to have hearing and sight screening programs in place for early detection of impediments that may impair educational outcomes in the future.

The more young children are helped to develop literacy at home, the better they will do in school. This means providing as many opportunities as possible for children to develop pre-reading and writing skills. Families with young children should have access to support programs help their children develop these skills.

Pre-school education provides young children with opportunities to develop skills necessary for school. Early socialisation and learning activities facilitate cognitive **development. All children should have access to quality pre-school education.**

5.3 Education policy and programs

There are three important strategic areas for action within the school system to improve equity in education outcomes. These are:

- improving teaching and learning opportunities;
- providing a range of student welfare, behavioural and learning support mechanisms through full-service or community schools; and
- developing home/school partnerships, particularly with low SES and Indigenous families.

Beyond this, improved funding for education is fundamental to an effective Blueprint for Action. This involves both increased funding and a revised funding model for government and private schools.

- **Improving learning opportunities**

One way to look at improving learning opportunities is to examine the features of education systems that have had greater success in achieving equity in education than Australia. One such country is Finland. Finland has achieved higher average school outcomes than Australia and with much smaller gaps in achievement between students from low and high SES families.

Some key features of Finland's school system are:

- highly qualified and well-paid teachers;
- quick identification of students falling behind;
- intensive individual and small group work with those who fall behind;
- specialist learning needs teachers and teachers' assistants to work with those who fall behind;
- systematic collaboration between teachers in schools and multi-disciplinary teams including social workers and health professionals;
- small schools (eg, <300 students in primary schools) and small class sizes (20-30 students);
- extensive teacher training in the classroom with mentors and training for teaching students performing at different levels.

Australia should draw on the experience of Finland and other equitable education systems to improve teaching and learning. In broad terms it involves improving training and professional development for teaching students with high levels of learning need and appointing more specialist teachers and support staff in providing learning assistance and more effective early intervention.

System planning for improvement is critical to improving equity in education outcomes. Each education system should develop a comprehensive plan to ensure that all children receive an adequate education and to reduce the achievement gaps. They must implement programs to improve the teaching of children who are not making expected learning progress.

Similarly, each school should have a plan to reduce the achievement gap in their school. Teachers should have individual student learning and development plans for those who have fallen behind.

- **Full-service and community schools**

Increased student welfare support in schools, especially those with a high proportion of students from low SES and Indigenous families, is a fundamental need across Australia. Many students are not receiving adequate personal support and welfare assistance. A priority is to increase the number of staff and the range of services to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students.

School systems should look to providing multi-disciplinary teams in schools consisting of teachers, counsellors, social workers, health professionals and other social welfare professionals implement early intervention programs and to assist students who have fallen behind. As far as possible, health and social services for families and students should be provided in an integrated delivery system incorporating schools and in which services are connected through a variety of mechanisms so that children and families get the help they need, when and where they need it.

At a minimum, these other services should be linked to schools, if not co-located. In a school-linked approach to integrating services for children, services are provided to children and their families through collaboration among schools, health care providers and social and community service agencies. Schools can serve as a focal point for information about the availability of services and also for the delivery of critical services to families and children. Schools can participate in the planning and governing the collaborative effort and personnel at the school coordinate the collaborative effort in each school.

- **Home/school partnerships**

Parent participation in schooling and the learning of their children is fundamental to improving attendance at schools and outcomes for students not achieving expected progress. Several key research studies have shown that students who are farthest behind their peers make the largest improvement in outcomes under parent involvement programs. Engaging low income and Indigenous parents in their children's schooling can make a very significant contribution to improve outcomes.

Home/school liaison officers are a practical way of increasing parent participation in children's learning. Home/school liaison officers can assist families in gaining the support they need from other community and government agencies, help parents assist the learning of their children, provide information about the school and its programs, provide advice on parenting and create a relationship between home and school to support children's learning. They can liaise with teachers on behalf of families and students.

The Blueprint for Action should include the introduction of government-supported parent participation programs and home/school liaison officers in every school that serves a relatively high proportion of students from low SES and/or Indigenous backgrounds. An initial step towards this goal would be to establish a few pilot projects to establish good practice principles and procedures.

- **School funding review**

Government funding of public schools is inadequate to achieve the National Goals. The current funding strategies of Australian governments are not adequately addressing the priority challenges for Australian schools as set out in the National Goals.

A review of the funding of schools, both public and private, is fundamental to improving equity in education. Funding should be better directed at improving equity in education, that is, at increasing the proportion of students who receive an adequate education and at reducing the achievement gaps in education outcomes.

The existing funding framework for public schools is only marginally structured to address equity. The current approach is not designed to give priority to the relative needs of students. It retains a strong emphasis on equal funding per student with relatively minor adjustments for identified student need. The socio-demographic characteristics of schools figure little in funding allocation systems across Australia.

The funding arrangements for private schools are nominally directed at the SES status of school communities. However, the arrangements are fatally flawed in terms of the achievement of equity in education. The SES funding model has delivered high levels of funding to private schools where students from high income families form the large proportion of enrolments. A majority of private schools are over-funded according to their SES assessment and the over-funding is almost entirely directed to the higher

SES schools. As such, the current arrangements serve to promote further advantage and inequity in school outcomes.

A new review of funding is needed to develop a more equitable system of funding public and private schools and to better achieve the National Goals for Schooling.

This statement has been prepared by Save Our Schools in the context of the 2020 Summit. It is intended to contribute to the ongoing public dialogue about the priorities in school education in Australia. <http://www.soscanberra.com/>