

### **About APPA**

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is the national professional association for primary school principals in Australia, representing over 7200 principals from affiliated Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools in each state and territory.

APPA's advocacy is founded on:

- Every child attending a school with high-performing leaders and quality staff;
- Initiatives, actions and projects that are research informed and encourage contemporary professional learning and growth; and,
- The knowledge that primary schools provide all Australian children with the opportunity to acquire the necessary foundational academic, social and emotional skills to lead full and rewarding lives.

Australia's future is dependent upon an educated population that is responsive to a changing world and the challenges it brings.

### **The Context of Primary Schools**

APPA supports a strong focus on quality primary school education whereby there is an alliance between societal goals of building connections with, and contributing to, the wider community through family, work and citizenship, and the educational opportunities, intellectual growth and sense of wellbeing experienced by the individual.

APPA's Charter on Primary Schooling states:

*Primary schools teach our children and contribute to our nation's future. They embrace the responsibility of giving children the academic and social foundations for leading fulfilled and enriched lives. In our school communities, each child's identity and culture are celebrated; personal responsibility is encouraged and expected; and, the knowledge and skills are gained to become independent and lifelong learners.*

The above statement intentionally links teaching children with building the *nation's* future. School leaders and teachers do not differentiate the teaching of children based on state and territory borders, school enrolment boundaries or school sector. For the teacher, it is the child's *needs* rather than origin that determines the learning plan for that child.

### **Preamble**

In order to submit this feedback, APPA surveyed members of its 27-member National Advisory Council. Their key suggestions are:

- i. The Declaration speaks to teachers and be relevant to their work;
- ii. Student voice is present and student agency fostered;
- iii. The Declaration's goals are sufficiently resourced; and,
- iv. The Declaration has a clear *raison d'être* and be fit for purpose.

## **1. What are your expectations of a national aspirational Declaration on Australian education?**

A national aspirational Declaration on Australian education is the 'Touchstone' document for driving school education and places young Australians at its centre. It clearly articulates the purposes of their schooling.

The Declaration addresses equity and excellence by:

- recognising and respecting the diversity of Australia's population;
- reflecting contemporary views of how children learn; and,
- targeting adequate resources to achieve both aspirations.

Australian students will be fostered by a Declaration with aspirational goals which focus on:

- a curriculum which drives student achievement;
- the participation of families and community in education; and,
- a culture of learning and continuous improvement in schools.

A national aspirational Declaration on Australian education provides the foundation for those principles, philosophical positions, policies, structures and school practices which make schooling in Australia effective. They are articulated through accessible language and in formats which guide and influence the day-to-day work of school leaders and teachers.

## **2. Who should the national Declaration inspire and/or guide?**

The national Declaration should ensure all Australians understand that community attitudes towards schools and schooling are powerful determinants of student outcomes. It should inspire the nation to hold our children dear and give their schooling our highest priority.

The national Declaration is a touchstone document for governments, education authorities, school leaders and teachers as they consider their next efforts on behalf of young Australians.

Parents will find the Declaration an invaluable frame of reference from which to consider the educational arrangements available to them. The wider community, particularly industry and business, the public service, education professional associations, universities and school partner organisations will turn to the Declaration for advice on school education and its efficacy.

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

One respondent to this question stated,

*"It underpins my work as a principal, it acts as a guiding principle not a daily use document."*

While no school leaders indicated daily, frequent or even regular use of the Melbourne Declaration, sixty-one percent of respondents (19/31) indicated they had used it in their work.

They had used it to:

- underpin school improvement agendas;
- highlight goals to staff and community;
- set goals for staff professional learning;
- 'anchor' their leadership;
- guide curriculum decisions and development; and,

- reflect on their leadership in making decisions as to whether children’s experiences are equitable.

Another respondent expressed a very different view on the influence of the Melbourne Declaration at his or her school,

*“Very little impact at the grass roots level. Its motherhood statements are too nebulous to be anything but condescending.”*

The currency of the Melbourne Declaration was questioned by others.

The Melbourne Declaration has a very uneven profile in Australian primary schools and amongst their leaders. A refreshed national aspirational Declaration of Australian school education will succeed if it speaks directly to those who work in primary schools each day, inspiring them to give life to the Declaration.

#### **4. What do you consider are the three most important economic, social and technological changes that will shape the future of education in Australia?**

The economic, social, and technological changes Australia is experiencing, and will continue to face, influence education to varying degrees. The impact on primary schools of changes in public policy may include, for example, altered resource allocations, demands for curriculum expansion, broadening digitally enhanced pedagogy and provision of wrap-around services.

The particular economic changes school leaders expect to influence their work and their schools include:

- higher workforce participation (i.e. longer hours, dual income households);
- more expensive child health services; and,
- the cost of connectivity, both technological and over distance.

Increasing economic and social change challenges primary school communities to expand the services traditionally provided by schools. When this expansion moves into areas of parental and family responsibility, it increases what might be called the ‘institutionalisation’ of childhood. A revised or new Declaration will serve young Australians best if it drives policies which privilege play and unstructured social interactions across the early years of childhood. Achieving this requires public policy initiatives which recognise the needs of working parents and their children. In this same regard, the high economic cost of connectivity, particularly in rural and remote Australia, raises issues of equity for primary schools.

In the opinion of primary school leaders, there is a conflation of social and technological changes which challenge our schools. One respondent expressed it thus,

*“Next is the challenge of being connected via social media and yet narrowing the voices and views that you connect with. It is important that personal and social capability has strong prominence in supporting good skills in social management, self-regulation and appreciating others’ perspectives. Diversity of society brings diversity of opinion. Being able to listen and not simply reject is important.”*

While never losing focus on literacy, numeracy and other core content areas, primary schools consider a student’s:

- disposition towards lifelong learning;

- personal and social capabilities to address the changing nature of families and communities; and,
- resilience and mental health.

This will only be possible if the current curriculum load in primary school classrooms is lightened. A new national aspirational Declaration articulates the need for primary teachers to have the time to implement these ‘informal’ curriculum elements.

### **5. How can a national Declaration best reflect that Australians need to continue to participate in learning throughout their lifetime?**

First, the Declaration is unambiguous in stating that Australian society values learning and that parents and the community are relentless in their commitment to education and in their support of educators and schools. Beginning with infants learning to be self-aware through to seniors learning about the final stages of life, the Declaration calls on every Australian to participate in learning.

In order to reflect the need for Australians to have the dispositions, skills and abilities to engage in lifelong learning, a national Declaration recognises the contribution of schools in providing those attributes. For example, the skills of learning how to learn, critical thinking and problem-solving which enable ongoing learning and underpin personal agency have their foundation in primary school; as does the knowledge and skills to choose wisely and engage effectively with others. These are real world, transferable skills which serve Australians throughout their lives.

Respondents to this question have identified a wide range of human characteristics which are developed, at least in part by effective schooling. The list includes:

- Inclusivity;
- a futures perspective;
- authentic and respectful relationships;
- technological understanding; and,
- curiosity and adaptability.

If ‘sowing the seeds’ of lifelong learning for students is a significant aspiration Australians have for our primary schools, the Declaration must recognise the necessity of high-quality teachers with the evidence-based pedagogy and the curriculum time and space to achieve it.

### **6. How could the concepts of equity, excellence and the attributes for young Australians in the Melbourne Declaration be updated to ensure they are still contemporary over the next decade?**

The concepts of equity and excellence must be clearly defined. Equity is not about treating all Australian students the same. It is providing all Australian students with the early and sustained intervention they require to access education successfully at every level.

Excellence cannot be narrowly defined in terms of academic success or cognitive ability. There are multiple pathways through the compulsory years of schooling in response to differing student needs.

Student attributes should be expanded to include global citizenship, resilience, higher order thinking, and collaborative skills and capacities.

The aim that any successful aspirational document written in 2019 should remain contemporary until 2029 is not realistic. The changes a successful Declaration inspire will, in turn, demand new goals and aspirations. However, one method of ensuring the Declaration is contemporary today is for it to incorporate student voice and champion their agency.

### **7. Are the eight areas for action in the Melbourne Declaration still contemporary and how well do they address the goals?**

The uniqueness of primary education is not captured in the eight action areas. There needs to be greater focus on early childhood education and equity of access to preschool education with an strong emphasis on the critical foundation of Years Three to Six, regardless of the school structure in which they occur.

The action areas are limiting because they do not address the expanding number and range of diverse learners in primary schools; for example, EALD students, students with multiple disabilities and students with mental health issues.

World class curriculum and assessment requires greater definition. The Australian Curriculum must be decluttered in order to allow teachers the flexibility to address emergent issues such as resilience (and student wellbeing more generally), global citizenship, collaboration and inquiry skills. Emergent issues and Australian education's response to them should be articulated in the new Declaration.

Likewise, definitions of stronger partnerships and strengthening accountability and transparency and their benefits in terms of students' development must be articulated. For example, point in time census testing of elements of literacy and numeracy are not sufficient to evaluate the needs of Australian students or to indicate how well schools are achieving the goals set for them.

Overall, the school leaders surveyed by APPA rated the action areas seventy-seven percent contemporary and sixty-eight percent effective in addressing the two goals.

### **8. Are new priority areas for action needed? And are there areas that should no longer be a priority?**

Two new areas of action have been identified by respondents to the APPA survey.

#### **a) Closing the gap of disadvantage**

This is different to Action Area 7 in scope and intention. In addition to Indigenous students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, it includes students subject to:

- cognitive and physical disabilities;
- chronic mental and physical health issues;
- low levels of wellbeing;
- living in intergenerational poverty; or
- suffering any form of social isolation.

Successful action in this area will mean students have an improved quality of life rather than just improved academic achievement. For example, an increase in the accurate diagnosis and effective intervention for conditions that prevent learning will also decrease anxiety in parents and students. The Declaration should include measures of success in this action area.

#### **b) Interdisciplinary learning**

This area for action would focus on skill development rather than content knowledge. It will require students to have digital literacy and use digital tools (including Artificial Intelligence) in blended learning environments. Primary schools addressing this area for action will need the capacity to:

- engage community and partner participation;
- provide explicit teaching of thinking and collaborative skills;
- have inclusive cultures and practices; and,
- access high level, quality professional learning for teachers and principals.

Again, measures of success should be included in the Declaration.

Two existing areas of action were identified as needing refreshment

**a) Developing stronger partnerships**

There needs to be greater emphasis on the two-way nature of strong partnerships and a consequent strengthening of accountability for those groups or organisations representing or supporting particular cohorts of students. While facilities and resources may cater for the health and wellbeing of students in community, the primary purpose of all partnerships, including those in inter-agency hubs, must be to improve teaching and learning in schools.

**b) Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment**

The curriculum must respond to international and national trends as they emerge. For instance, cross curriculum perspectives should promote understanding and appreciation of all facets of contemporary Australian society. There should be an increased focus on early childhood education. The general capabilities should be expanded to include topics such as innovation and global connectivity. More sophisticated assessment of an expanded set of general capabilities would be necessary.

In fact, this area of action could simply be recast as ‘Curriculum and Assessment’ as the Australian Curriculum is now well established and the descriptor ‘world-class’ could be considered cliché.

There are three other areas for action which primary school leaders consider ‘business as usual’. These are:

- Enhancing middle years development;
- Supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions; and,
- Strengthening accountability and transparency.

They should be replaced by more relevant and sharply focussed statements covering:

- Middle years’ re-focus on Years Three and Four in primary schools to benefit students who are historically under resourced compared to their peers in other year levels;
- Youth transitions facilitated by the strong accountable two-way partnerships previously mentioned; and,
- Addressing the limitations of current national assessment arrangements.

This comment from a respondent demonstrates that more of the same is not required.

*“I am not sure how much more accountable and transparent we can be.”*

Areas of action which remain relevant, together with any additional areas identified in this review, should address the learning needs of young Australians from birth to eighteen years of age. Early childhood, school, vocational and university education can be viewed as equal contributing partners in this space.

All the areas for action stated in the new Declaration need refreshed statements describing how they are enacted to ensure *all* school students can engage in learning with dignity and enthusiasm.

### **9. Are there better ways to measure and share progress towards achieving the Declaration's goals?**

The measurement of equity is complex. However, comparisons of school achievement between the students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds indicate inequity remains a blight on Australian education. The achievement of needs-based funding, independent of sector, school setting and level of schooling, remains a challenge for Australian governments.

Similarly, the measurement of excellence is a contested issue. The primary school leaders surveyed do not want narrow, point-in-time assessments to be the only recognised measures available. Teacher judgement, formative assessment and a rapidly expanding range of standardised test instruments should all be referenced in a contemporary national education Declaration.

Both qualitative and quantitative data should be included in the measurement of a refreshed Goal 2 for student development. Exit data, routinely collected and reported for school leavers, could be enhanced with information from education partners about social connectedness and participation.

A more informed and constructive public discourse on education could be realised if the Declaration privileged reports of growth achieved by students in their learning journeys rather than simple point-in-time scores that find their way into the daily news.

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

Australian governments must assert that all the sectors have equal value in the educative process and recognise that early and primary years are key to successful secondary and post-secondary education.

The professional standards for teachers and the professional standard for principal provide a single point of reference for Australian teachers and school leaders to discuss their work. They are powerful tools for cooperative effort and their use and impact should be strengthened in the new Declaration.

Involving peak educational associations meaningfully in setting public policy encourages teachers and school leaders to embrace the education goals and strive to achieve them.

Finally, the Declaration itself must be purposeful and linked to the daily work of teachers in classrooms. This will give a shared understanding of the crucial role teachers play in achieving the goals we set for Australian education.

### **Concluding remarks**

It is important that Australian education has an overarching statement that is agreed by all jurisdictions and defines what we do and why we do it. It's the foundation from which we work and binds us together in a strong moral purpose. However, the Melbourne Declaration is not used enough. It doesn't really impact on day-to-day work at school level. Most parents and teachers wouldn't know it existed. This is not unexpected, the busy nature of education trumps things like the Declaration.

Influencing the development of effective public policy in school education through clearly stated goals and aspirations is critical. Making the Declaration a 'touchstone' document from which effective policy is developed, and to which teachers and school leaders refer and use to plan their next effort and evaluate the efficacy of their work, will ensure it drives school and systemic improvement.

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