



14 June 2019

**National Catholic Education Commission
Submission to the Education Council
Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians December 2008 (the Melbourne Declaration).

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is the representative body of Australia's 1750+ Catholic schools. Working closely with the state and territory Catholic education commissions, the NCEC advocates for and influences policy at the national level on behalf of Australia's Catholic schools.

The NCEC welcomes this review. Education in Australia is increasingly complex. Changing familial, societal, political and government expectations relating to school performance and responsibility, comparative school achievement (nationally and internationally), economic considerations and "returns" on school investment are placing all schools and the teachers who work in them under considerable pressure. While schools must be responsive to our changing society, the NCEC believes that increasing demands for more from schools, risks:

- confusing the purposes of education in Australia;
- minimising the importance of deep knowledge from which thinking (creative, analytical and critical) follows; and
- promoting a solely utilitarian view of education which focuses on the student as the means rather than an individual with inherent dignity.

The Melbourne Declaration plays a significant role in mitigating these risks by setting out the agreed national educational goals and a vision for schooling in Australia. After a decade, a review is prudent and timely. The NCEC encourages all Australian Education Ministers to devise a new Declaration that endorses broad, clear and relevant educational goals and recommits to action to achieve them.

About Australia Catholic schools

The mission of Australia's Catholic schools is similar but distinct from other Australian schools. Australia's Catholic schools are inspired by an educational philosophy built on a Catholic understanding of the human person.

The person of each individual human being... is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school.¹

Catholic schools seek to be providers of education and advancers of human flourishing including truth, goodness, love, work, leisure and faith. Through their culture, ethos, mission and commitment to educational programs, Catholic schools represent the harmonisation between learning and living a Christian life.

Australia's network of over 1,750 Catholic schools educate one in five students and employ over 96,000 teaching and non-teaching staff. Australia's Catholic schools are universal in their reach, offering an education to all students, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, growing proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disabilities. Catholic schools are situated across Australia with more than 40 per cent outside major metropolitan areas. In some remote communities, a Catholic school is the only school available.

To assist with this review, the NCEC offers the following general comments. These are provided to supplement and support any submissions of state and territory Catholic education commissions:

1. The Melbourne Declaration, agreed to by all Australian Education Ministers in 2008, remains relevant and valuable. While some updating and additional detail is required, the NCEC believes that the current Melbourne Declaration articulates broad national educational goals and provides a useful guide for action by governments, policy makers and educators.
2. The NCEC continues to support the articulation of the role of schools in the Melbourne Declaration:

"schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians".

A revised Declaration should continue to articulate this vital role of schools. It not only endorses the approach of Australia's Catholic schools, which offer an education of the whole person, but it also cautions against the development of a utilitarian view of schools which regards education solely as a tool for economic growth.

3. The NCEC believes that a revised Declaration should include:
 - a. **A reference to the primacy of the role of parents, carers and families as the first and most influential educators of their children.**

Australia's Catholic schools seek to work in partnership with our students' families. Encouraging families to be fully involved in our schools and their children's learning

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education (1997) *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html. Accessed 14 June 2019.

engenders trust, encourages respect for learning and builds community support for the mission of the Catholic school.

While parents, carers and families are referred to in the Melbourne Declaration, they are referred to collectively with the broader community, business and other education providers. This suggests that parents, carers and families are just another stakeholder in the education sector when the NCEC believes that their role in a student's life is central and unique. In our view, the family should be given primacy in a revised Declaration.

b. An acknowledgement of the positive contribution of faith-based schooling to the spiritual and moral development of individual students and the common good.

Australia's Catholic schools are part of a wide cohort of faith-based schools and systems. Most non-government schools in Australia are faith-based and, as such, are inheritors of millennia of human religious history. Faith based schools have helped shaped contemporary Australian society and their existence is a testament to the ongoing value placed on them by Australian society, our governments and the families who choose them for their children. Australia's Catholic schools have been a major factor in:

- raising the poorest up to the middle class;
- originally reflecting but ultimately reducing sectarianism and ethnic tensions in Australia; and
- ensuring Australia celebrates cultural and religious diversity rather than seeking to homogenise all students through a single educational option.

The NCEC believes that a revised Declaration should consider acknowledging the on-going positive contribution of faith-based education to Australia's social ecology. This contribution includes not only the spiritual benefits offered to the individual student but also the overall benefit to Australian society by sharing in the formation of ethical and virtuous citizens.

c. An acknowledgement of the importance of early childhood education with consideration given to including as a national educational goal the opportunity for every child to access, as part of their formal schooling, universally funded early childhood education.

The NCEC acknowledges the commitment by Education Ministers in the Melbourne Declaration to strengthening early childhood education and the various reforms, reports and frameworks which have sought to action this commitment. Disappointingly this commitment and work has not resulted in a consistent national

model for early childhood education within all Australian schools. The NCEC believes this is required.

In early 2018, the NCEC welcomed the publication of *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*.² This report not only confirmed the significant contribution of early childhood education to educational achievement, it also recommended the provision of funding for universal access in the year before school for all children and the progressive implementation of universal funding for all three-year-old children.

In an endorsement of the importance of early childhood education to schooling, the NCEC recommends that a revised Declaration include, as a national educational goal, universal access to early childhood education.

d. An acknowledgement of the importance of the primary years of schooling as an important and crucial stage in a student's learning progression.

The NCEC recommends that a revised Declaration include an acknowledgement of the importance of the primary years of schooling to a child's learning. There seems to be no reason for the inclusion of early childhood education, middle and senior years in the Melbourne Declaration without also acknowledging the importance of schooling in the primary years.

e. A statement about the importance of schooling which encourages lifelong learning and the articulation of a vision for lifelong learning.

There is an increasing emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning in education. Research supports approaches in schools which encourage lifelong learning and assist in the development of characteristics that make lifelong learning integral to schooling and a valued part of life post-school.³ The NCEC suggests that policy makers and educators would benefit from a clear statement in a revised Declaration about what lifelong learning is and the role of schools to encourage lifelong learning.

f. A statement specifying the integration between the broad national educational goals and the educational measures or reforms designed to achieve these goals.

The NCEC calls for a clearer expression in a revised declaration of the connection between the national educational goals and the measures to achieve them. The existing section in the Melbourne Declaration which sets out how the educational goals are achieved, should be updated to reflect the current body of work being undertaken by the Education Council and pursuant to national agreements. The NCEC

² Available at: https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf.

³ Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd (2003) *Engaging secondary school students in lifelong learning*

emphasises that any new action plans reflect the best available evidence-based teaching practices.⁴

Please contact the National Education Commission on the details below should you wish to discuss this submission.



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⁴ For example, the NSW Education Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation has highlighted seven themes which support improved student performance: high expectations; explicit teaching; effective feedback; use of data to inform practice; classroom management; wellbeing and collaboration. See “What works best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance” Available at file:///N:/Government/Education%20Council/Review%20of%20the%20Melbourne%20Declaration/Relevant%20articles/What-works-best_FA-2015_AA.pdf. Accessed 7 June 2019