

Melbourne declaration review 2019



**ACT Council of
Parents & Citizens
Associations**

The parent voice on public education

ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is the representative body
for Parent & Citizen associations in the ACT.

Council represents over 60,000 parents in 85 ACT public schools.

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Executive Summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliates (P&Cs) and make representations to Government on behalf of parents and carers of ACT Government school students.

Council strongly supports the *Melbourne Declaration*, the goal of equity and excellence in Australian schools and, that all Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. In support of the review of the *Melbourne Declaration*, Council provides the following submission.

Should you require clarification on further information please contact our office (see front page).

1. Expectations of a national aspirational declaration on Australian education.

Council expects that a national declaration on Australian education should set principles which are used to inform the Australian Curriculum, guide the development and application of educational policies and procedures, scaffold quality teaching and learning programs; and drive investment in the professional development of educators. Council expects an aspirational declaration to purposefully guide the journey to ensuring the provision of excellent and equitable education in Australia.

Council supports the two goals of the *Melbourne Declaration* and believes the goals remain relevant to the future needs of the Australian education system.

2. Who should the national declaration inspire and/ or guide?

Council considers a national declaration should comprehensively aim to inspire, guide and shape Australia's educational direction for the next decade, across all levels of Government and schools.

3. What impact has the *Melbourne Declaration* had on public education in the ACT?

It is difficult to ascertain whether the aspirational goals set by the *Melbourne Declaration* have been achieved. The broad statements would conceivably require assessment of individual students and schools to determine any degree of achievement. However, feedback from Council members (parents and carers), suggests that the *Melbourne Declaration* has had little visible impact on the public education sector in the ACT.

Research on performance data clearly shows that disadvantaged students such as students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students demonstrates that educational equity has not yet been achieved.

Feedback to Council suggests that although the *Melbourne Declaration* informs the Australian Curriculum, it does not appear to inform the development and application of public-school policies and procedures in the ACT. Furthermore, ACT public-school parents and carers are concerned that the *Melbourne Declaration* has not resulted in:

- Visible, stronger partnerships between schools, parents, carers and families. Council questions whether schools have adapted approaches to working in partnership with families, parents and carers, given changes to employment trends. While parents and carers from some primary public-schools in the ACT have strong partnerships with their school, this is inconsistent across the ACT. Most parents report this is not the case and the role of families, parents and carers is to support the direction set by the school, and therefore cannot be considered a true partnership. Parents and carers of ACT public high school and college students advise that opportunities to partner with schools are small or non-existent, except where student behaviour is in issue. In this case, parents and carers are forced to rely on information from their public high school or college students and critical information is missed. Council considers that the *Melbourne Declaration* has not resulted in stronger partnerships between ACT public schools and families, parents and carers.
- Setting of high expectations for all ACT public school students. Despite the significance of setting high expectations as outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration*, ACT public-school

communications often expresses that *'there is nothing wrong with a 'C' grade.'* Council believes the use of such language sets the broad and average expectation of 'at level' performance for all students. Hence, setting high expectations appears countered by application of the 'A to E' system of grading within public-schools in the ACT. Council suggests that this messaging may cause unnecessary conflict between parents and carers and schools. Council believes research clearly shows that setting high expectations to stretch and challenge student learning has been demonstrated to improve student performance. Accordingly, it is considered that setting high expectations needs to be relative to a student's previous performance and reflected in school to home communications. For example, there is nothing wrong with a well-earned 'C' grade. Hence, Council encourages parents and carers to consider grades as indicators of student growth and whether a grade has been 'well-earned,' this allows for realistic expectations to be set in accordance with previous performance. Therefore, Council believes the *Melbourne Declaration* has not resulted in the setting of high expectations for all ACT public students.

- Education for some ACT public school students with disability does not appear equitable. Parents and carers of students with disability in ACT public schools report that students are often not included in otherwise whole of school events for example assemblies and athletics carnival. In some cases, this is due to access or accessibility and in others the lack of adjustments to support inclusion where possible. The concept of equitable education will be expanded on under part 8 of this submission.

4. Three most important economic, social and technological changes to shape the future of education in Australia.

It is difficult for Council to predict the future requirements which will shape the future of education in Australia. However, recent research shows that students finish formal education lacking 'soft skills' such as analytical and problem-solving skills, adaptability and emotional intelligence. While analytical and problem-solving skills are currently taught in ACT public schools, research is showing substantial increases in young students with anxiety and depression. For Council, this highlights a need for students to learn emotional intelligence, wellbeing and mental health skills, and schools provide great opportunities to reach large numbers of students. However, Council believes that specialised wellbeing and mental health staff would be required to assist schools provide wellbeing and mental health education. Council considers a more rounded education including wellbeing and mental health supports will preparing students to adapt to the future as it unfolds.

5. A declaration with a vision of continued learning.

Whatever the future of education holds for Australia, Council considers there is no doubt students will need the capacity to continue learning throughout their lives. This includes the ability to self-identify preferred methods of learning.

Despite access to electronically available information for learning, the relationship between students' and their teacher often determines student growth. Therefore, future learning is considered likely to require teachers, although it is acknowledged that this will include developments in technology.

6. Equity and Excellence for the next decade.

Council suggests that the concepts of equity and excellence in the *Melbourne Declaration* do not require updating. However, in order to achieve these goals, Council considers that additional areas of action are required (refer to part 8 of the submission).

7. Do the *Melbourne Declaration* areas for action achieve the goals?

The current areas for action may be considered to scaffold equity and excellence in Australian education. Council believes that some of these action areas may require slight enhancement (refer to part 8 below). Additionally, research and feedback to Council suggests that there is more to be done to achieve these goals. Council considers that supplementary areas for action are also required.

8. Priority areas for action.

Council considers that the priority areas for action, identify the foundational concepts behind excellent and equitable education. In addition to the current areas for action in the *Melbourne Declaration*, Council believes that the following areas need to be included:

- Inclusive education – Students with disability or with differing cultural backgrounds do not always feel welcome or a sense of belonging with their school community. Hence, Council recommends an area for action where all students within a school community feel welcome and identify with a sense of belonging, irrespective of whether students belong to a support unit or mainstream class. (Council appreciates that students require a variety of settings to meet their educational needs, accordingly a one size fits all model for schooling is not supported). Identifying with a school community and feeling welcome includes the adjustments for supported participation in whole of school events as much as possible.
- Student and parent agency – an area of action recognising the need for schools to listen and respond to the rights of the child. Feedback to Council indicates that students are not always able to voice their wishes or concerns hence, Council would support a clear role for student agency and parents to partner with schools to ensure student agency is fulfilled.
- Wellbeing and mental health – Studies show that anxiety and depression along with other mental health concerns are affecting a greater number of students from a younger age. Council believes that wellbeing and mental health seriously affects a students' capacity to learn and may therefore prevent a student from reaching their potential. Without strategies in place to assist and manage wellbeing and mental health educational excellence cannot be achieved.
- Trauma informed practice – Council considers that some wellbeing and mental health issues stem from trauma and require tailored trauma informed response within education settings. Feedback to Council identifies that this is not always the case, and in some cases, responses can inflict additional trauma.
- Parental engagement or working in partnership with parents – Feedback to Council identifies that parental engagement is a frequently used term, which means different things to different education stakeholders. In some cases, parents and carers identify that the role of parents and carers in education settings has not changed in decades, despite many changes in lifestyle (for example; family structures, more parents are working, and time pressures). Schools often exhibit statements of working in partnership with parents, however feedback suggests schools prefer the partnership operates on their terms. Hence, Council would support a clear refined statement of partnership and parental engagement.

- High expectations and growth in student progress – Council strongly supports the high expectations area for action. As discussed earlier, this expectation may be argued to have caused some conflict in the ACT due to policy language used concerning A to E grading. Council considers, that the requirement for education jurisdictions to report on the action areas would highlight this inconsistency and require redress.

9. How to measure and share progress towards the *Melbourne Declaration* goals?

Despite current reporting of school and jurisdiction performance data by *My School*, Council would support additional regular and transparent reporting on all action areas by all jurisdictions. Council believes that transparent publishing reporting against the action areas will see greater uptake and support of concepts within the *Melbourne Declaration*. For public schools, it is expected that education departments would be responsible for reporting.

10. Ensuring the goals of the *Melbourne Declaration* are achieved.

Council considers that reporting against the goals and action areas of the *Melbourne Declaration* will ensure the foundational concepts are embedded in the education policy, procedures and practices in all jurisdictions. Furthermore, it is envisioned that the goals and action areas of the declaration will scaffold quality teaching and learning programs; and drive investment in the professional development of educators.