



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

*Submission to the MCEETYA
consultation on the National
Declaration on Educational
Goals for Young Australians*

Brotherhood of St Laurence
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1 Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others. Our work is based on an understanding that the remedy to poverty lies in integrating social and economic policy as a basis to strengthening the capacities of individuals and communities.

The Brotherhood has a long history of research and service delivery relevant to the education of children and young people, and the transition through the compulsory years to independence. Our research record encompasses longitudinal research on the life chances of children and young people (Gilley & Taylor 1995; Taylor & Fraser 2003; Taylor & Macdonald 1998; Taylor & Nelms 2006; Taylor & Nelms 2008), studies on young people's transition to work (MacDonald 1999) and studies of their position and disadvantages in the labour market (Marsh & Perkins 2006; Tresize-Brown 2004).

We have completed evaluations of the Brotherhood's own services such as Parents as Career and Transition Supports (PACTS), the transition support service addressed at parents (Bedson & Perkins 2006). Furthermore, two issues of the Brotherhood's Social Barometer, *Monitoring children's chances* (Scutella & Smyth 2005) and *Challenges facing Australian youth* (Boese & Scutella 2006), present indicators of capabilities and disadvantage that examine how well equipped Australian children and young people are (or are not) to negotiate successfully the transition to school, through school and beyond.

Our research and services focuses on those people at greatest risk at key life transition stages considered critical to their future wellbeing. The second of these transition stages is Through School to Work. Accordingly, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the National Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians.

2 Comments on the National Declaration draft and the Commitment to Action

The Brotherhood welcomes the reiteration of the collective responsibility for young people's education and, in particular, the commitment of a new level of collaboration between all Australian governments in ensuring enhanced educational outcomes for all young Australians. We suggest that a commitment to enhanced intergovernmental collaboration is a necessary first step that will enable other stakeholders, including parents, communities and business, to contribute to improved educational attainment for all young people. In particular, there is a compelling need, as a priority in the post-compulsory years, for new funding models that align with current policy objectives. While schools will often recognise the need for a given young person to learn outside a school setting, some schools, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, are not able to 'let go' of sufficient student funding without compromising their staff/teacher ratios. This is an area for unprecedented intergovernmental agreement and action.

We also strongly endorse the reframing of the National Declaration and, in particular, the recognition that in the current environment *education* rather than *schooling* is the key imperative. We welcome the move away from notions of teaching and curriculum to notions of learners who are also workers and community members and the need to be prepared for each of these roles. However, in establishing a goal for young Australians to be able to accept responsibility for their

own actions (p.5), the government must not move the burden of responsibility for success to young people, some of whom are already dealing with major structural barriers and material deprivations that result from decisions of others and that profoundly affect their ability to act.

The draft Declaration rightly elevates the attention given to supporting young Australians in becoming active and informed citizens. As noted in our submission on the establishment of an Australian Youth Forum (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2008), children and young people have a right to participate in the decisions that affect them, in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Beyond this right, in the context of globalisation it is imperative that education focuses not only on the development of young people's identity as worker but also on their identity as citizen. Historically, this focus on the worker/citizen has been a central concern of education systems; yet this balance has since the 1980s been skewed to focus on young people's future worker identity (Seddon 2008). In a context of increasing diversity and inequality, the Brotherhood strongly endorses an enhanced focus on young people becoming active, informed citizens.

3 Focus questions

Do the proposed educational goals for young Australians address the right outcomes?

The Brotherhood of St Laurence accepts that the proposed educational goals address the right outcomes in being framed around young people and their learning, rather than educational institutions. We endorse the shift from the existing Declaration's focus on curriculum and teaching.

The focus on successful learners is welcome. Our experience suggests that the development of a healthy learner identity—an awareness that people need to go on learning in their post-school life and are confident of their ability to do that—should be a key outcome for schools. Given that, the Brotherhood would recommend that the focus on 'an appetite for life-long learning' (p.5) should be a goal on its own, rather than a component of pathways.

We also welcome the goals for confident individuals and, in particular, the focus on young people's roles as family, community and workforce members. We note, however, that for many young people in the later years of schooling, these are not potential roles but roles they are already filling. The Brotherhood would also place a caveat against the risks in the final point. While we agree that it is an appropriate goal for young people to be able to embrace opportunities, make rational and informed decisions about their lives, and accept responsibilities, such a goal must always be framed within an understanding that many of the young people that the Brotherhood works with and for are already living with the consequences of decisions made by others. We argue it is imperative that the Declaration acknowledge the range of family and structural factors that constrain or influence the full participation of some young people in education.

We strongly endorse the goals outlined in the draft Declaration concerning the development of active and informed citizens, and the emphasis placed on values in the Preamble. Our comments here rest on the implications of this goal for curriculum and pedagogy and, in particular, the opportunities provided for students to experience schooling as active and informed citizens rather than as students who are taught about civics and citizenship. Our recommendation is that the commitment to action seeks a much higher retention of applied, multidisciplinary pedagogies from the early years of schooling in the senior years of school.

Finally, we strongly endorse the goal of promoting equity as a foundation for achieving the prior goals. This will only be achieved with a full understanding of the circumstances that prevent some Australian children fully engaging with the educational opportunities that governments provide.

Given that all young Australians are compelled to engage with the educational systems for a sustained period of their childhood and teenage years, there must be an obligation on government to provide the necessary supports to ensure equality of both opportunity and outcome: the achievement of a senior secondary qualification, or equivalent, for all young Australians.

The Brotherhood's research and service experience indicates that the barriers to full participation include financial hardship, housing crisis, parents' chronic health problems and disabilities, family conflict and violence, as well as child learning difficulties, disabilities and behavioural problems. These factors often intersect in complex ways. While we concur that support and hard work is required from children, young people, families, schools and their communities, we argue that it is the responsibility of the government to create the conditions for that hard work to occur within the education system. Our suggestions are outlined in our response to the commitments to action.

Are there other educational goals that should be considered?

In the context outlined in the Preamble, the loss of entry-level secure paid work and careers for young people not progressing to tertiary study has all but eliminated a relatively smooth transition from education to employment for this group. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of the *learner-worker* path, with the chronological separation between education and work almost completely disappeared. Part-time work is often undertaken at the same time as completing education and training: indeed 66.5% of Australia's 15–19 year olds are working part-time and 79% of these are studying full-time (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005) and this has implications for both employment and education structures.

Research indicates that part-time work is enjoyed by young people yet results in hectic lives (White & Wyn 2004). Part-time work also offers strategic benefits in moving to full-time employment (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley 2003), as does academic achievement. Thus, low-achieving students who do not have part-time jobs are doubly disadvantaged (Vickers 2002). For the many who do have part-time jobs there can be considerable mental and physical pressure, since young people can be susceptible to exploitation if employers do not act in good faith (NSW Teachers Federation 2007).

The Brotherhood believes the National Declaration should also include a goal of realigning educational institutions in ways that support young people to balance and benefit from their dual roles. We see this as one component of 'confident individuals'. In this regard, we support the work of the Australian National Schools Network in calling for an Intergenerational Compact to support young people.

Do the 'Commitments to Action' address the right outcomes?

We endorse the inclusion of a Commitment to Action in the draft Declaration and in particular the commitment to a new level of collaboration in the seven identified areas:

Developing stronger partnerships with parents, the community and business

We strongly endorse engaging parents in planning and supporting their child's progress through school. The Brotherhood's innovative work with parents in the early years and in transition from school to work has been predicated on the critical role they play in their children's development and learning. Our work clearly demonstrates parents' desire to have the information and skills to support their children's progress (Perkins & Peterson 2005). However, some parents face substantial obstacles to providing the optimal support to ensure their children attend and participate fully in school. While we welcome the focus on partnership to maximise student attendance, engagement and achievement, a true partnership does not rely on punitive measures and is attentive

to material barriers. For example, our research has found that some children do not attend school because their parents cannot afford to pay for their transport or lunches; these parents are also embarrassed to raise financial concerns with school staff (Bond & Horn 2007). Another example is of parents with intellectual disabilities who are unable to read to their young children. Clearly, specific initiatives are needed to effectively engage with parents in such circumstances and these have implications for the ways in which schools are funded.

Similarly, while we endorse the intent to engage partners from business and community to provide expanded learning and citizenship opportunities for students, these partnerships must be supported by a commitment to ensure teachers are able to integrate these opportunities into students' learning and development plans in meaningful ways. While progress is being made in pre-service teacher education to develop the skills for teachers to work collaboratively with industry and community, many existing teachers have not had the opportunity or training to develop such skills and knowledge. This has implications for in-service professional development and in turn for the ways that schools are funded.

Strengthening early childhood education

The commitment to development and strengthening of care and education in the years from birth to eight is strongly welcomed by the Brotherhood. It is not only financial poverty, but also lack of opportunity and capacity, that affects the life chances of children whose circumstances put them at a starting disadvantage. The Brotherhood argues that in most cases parents are the best placed to help improve their children's life chances and our philosophy is to work with parents and build their capacity.

Policies that rely on parents in the home to impose the values and practices of a middle-class Western-centric home environment (with the assumption that it is the best model and the only way children and families learn) are unlikely to succeed. All parents must be supported within their cultural context; and should be able to learn about mainstream Australian education while having their views, values and practices respected. The Brotherhood's findings in the (unpublished) research completed for the Department of Human Services' Breaking Cycles, Building Futures project (Hydon et al. 2005) are that engaging vulnerable children and families in universal services is most successful when four key principles are practised:

- overcome practical and structural barriers
- build positive relationships
- practise cultural sensitivity and value for effort
- provide effective service coordination and linkages.

Significantly, the report finds that while overcoming practical and structural barriers is commonly seen as straightforward to implement, building positive reciprocal relationships is more demanding but just as crucial and needs to accompany most interventions. It has particular efficacy for vulnerable culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and families. Our work with these children and families demonstrates that any support provided must be responsive, inclusive and appropriate. In addition, vulnerable children and families are, by definition, experiencing multiple and complex issues; and this reinforces the importance of having a suite of strategies in place.

Our work at the Brotherhood focuses on those at risk at four critical life transition stages, including the early years and the years through school to work. Accordingly, we welcome the recognition in the draft Declaration of the significance of the transitions to, through and from schooling and the commitment to support young Australians through these transitions.

We endorse the focus on early childhood development and the need for a developmentally appropriate educational program in the middle years. We believe it is important that the

development of that program is not age-based, focusing instead on the individualised assessment of interests, opportunities, barriers and needs and followed by the development of an integrated and timely response. Indeed, the Brotherhood argues for an integrated individual pathway plan for all school students that is developed at enrolment in school and progressively broadened, moving with the student throughout and beyond their school years.

While the focus of the draft Declaration with regard to the post-compulsory years is correctly placed on a range of pathways that meet the diverse needs of young Australians we believe the Declaration must include a concerted effort to ensure those diverse pathways are equally valued. While applied learning pedagogies will become increasingly significant in preparing all young people for a rapidly changing employment context, regardless of their pathway, such pedagogies are routinely undervalued in favour of the traditional, transmission pedagogy used in many disciplines. As a consequence, many young people are shepherded to university regardless of their interests or aspirations.

Finally, the wording of the Declaration here needs to acknowledge the prevalence of students who are already working during their years at school. For many, the effective transition is no longer from school to work, but from marginal work to sustained work with opportunities for advancement.

Improving the quality of teaching and school leadership

While we recognise the importance of teaching and school leadership, we underscore the recognition that this variable is secondary to student socio-economic background and that the variables intersect in complex ways. We endorse the commitment to recruiting high-calibre applicants to the teaching profession and creating the conditions to retain them. However, we believe the actions outlined fall short of ensuring that those students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds will maximise their potential and succeed in attaining the civic, foundational and vocational skills to be productive members of the community.

Specifically, we advocate:

- improved pre-service teacher education that focuses on applied pedagogies that have been found to have the greatest success with those students who are at risk of disengaging from education for a range of reasons
- targeted in-service professional development that focuses on teacher identity—developing understanding of what it is to be a ‘teacher’ in the 21st century— and works to develop an openness to working collaboratively beyond the classroom
- freeing teaching staff to teach. We recommend the development of a ‘Student Development Service’ that brings together into a single system the current array of specialist support programs, such as transition support workers, youth pathways, school focused youth services, community liaison workers, Managed Individual Pathways, primary welfare officers, careers advice and student support services. We consider the development of such a service to be an integral part of providing the conditions for effective teaching to occur.

Developing world-class curriculum and assessment

While we have limited comment to offer on the detail of curriculum, we do endorse the commitment to a broad and comprehensive curriculum that recognises young people not only as workers but also as citizens and community members. As already noted, in the context of globalisation and cultural diversity, an identity as a citizen is vital to enable them not only to deal with increased complexity but also to transcend social divisions (Seddon 2008). In this submission we have already argued for an enhanced focus on applied learning that develops multidisciplinary capabilities essential for the 21st century.

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- With regard to assessment, we strongly endorse the commitment to measure student performance in meaningful ways and the three-fold approach of assessment for learning, assessment as learning and assessment of learning.

Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians

The Brotherhood strongly endorses a Commitment to Action in improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians. However, the actions outlined need to be revised to recognise the need for schools to work with other education providers and with their communities. While the school sector provides an increasing range of options that work well for many young Australians whose cultural and social background accords with that of the school sector, there will always be some students whose needs are better served in contexts other than schools. All young Australians should be guaranteed access to 12 years of government-funded education, whether within schools or in a quality, alternative learning environment.

For those who remain within schools, providing additional support to disadvantaged young people or focusing on school improvement will have limited success without creating the conditions for parental engagement and removing financial or other impediments. Given this, the intent to make a significant investment that could create a truly free education system is strongly endorsed. Such a system would not limit provision to items directly related to the key learning areas but would include transport, technology, all texts, extracurricular activities, sports, speakers and so on that are vital components of a rich educational experience and are often beyond the limits of disadvantaged families (Seddon 2008). It would also enable learning support programs outside school hours for those young people who require additional out-of-school support. Such programs are often vital for groups such as newly-arrived migrant and refugee students.

While it is encouraging to see specific reference to homeless young people in the draft, it should be matched by a specific commitment to their needs. One-third of the homeless are young people under the age of 18, with 12% of the total being under the age of 12 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). Our research indicates that schools have a key role to play in preventing homelessness, since continued school attendance, after leaving home, is one factor that delays a permanent break with families and the transition to chronic homelessness (Charman et al. 1997). For those who have become homeless, a commitment to ‘provide additional support to disadvantaged students’ is insufficient to ensure these young people have equal access to high-quality schooling.

As noted in the draft Declaration, not all disadvantaged children and young people have poorer outcomes in the school system. However, students’ success in spite of disadvantage reflects more than individual effort or school improvement. Research clearly shows the characteristics of family, school, and community environments that elicit and foster the natural resiliency in children. These ‘protective factors’ comprise three broad categories: caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation including opportunities for valued responsibilities, for making decisions, for giving voice and being heard, and for contributing one’s talents to the community (Benard 1991). Accordingly the commitment to action must include a focus on creating an open and enabling educational landscape.

Increasing accountability and transparency

The Brotherhood welcomes the commitment to ‘unprecedented’ collaboration and the opportunities that exist in the context of an emerging social inclusion agenda. However, we stress that substantial improvements in the educational transitions and outcomes of disadvantaged young people will only be achieved if accountability is also enacted within government to place far higher priority on mainstream public services to be inclusive of all young Australians. This requires the development of appropriate targets to ensure accountability against the shared commitment to maximise the

social and economic participation of young people. For example, data could be collated on the effectiveness of restorative justice approaches in lowering levels of suspension and expulsion.

At the local level, while the commitments to public reporting will go some way to enabling parents and communities to be better informed of their school system, such a commitment demands the presentation of such reports through channels that meet the needs of diverse communities. Relying on new technology will not enable disadvantaged families who do not have access to such technologies to secure information.

Are there other ‘Commitments to Action’ that should be considered?

As noted in the body, the Brotherhood advocates the following additional commitments:

- Introduce truly free education so that no child is excluded because of cost.
- Structure support for low-achieving students, or students in disadvantaged areas where they must compete for limited opportunities, to help them gain part-time employment.
- Increase the numbers of young people who recognise themselves as lifelong learners and who have the skills to build on that identity, for example by enhancing the skills and knowledge of teachers in working with applied learning methodologies.
- Mainstream social inclusion principles as core business for government departments and portfolios. For instance, we recommend consolidating the current fragmented array of referral and assistance programs across portfolios into a single youth support structure that more effectively supports teachers in maximising the educational achievements of all students.
- Develop accountability measures of schools working collaboratively with their communities.
- Support teacher development in working within community (pre-service and in-service).
- Fund national parental development and support programs.
- Set targets for reduced levels of early school leaving, suspension and expulsion.

In summary, the Brotherhood commends the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs for its recognition of the need to draft a new Declaration to guide the education of young Australians in the 21st century. However, such a Declaration must flow through to become evident in federal, state and territory policy and practice and we urge the Council to monitor progress in the years to come.

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