



Submission on the Purpose of Public Education

March 2023

Introduction and purpose statement

Children and young people today have been born into a century characterised by rapid social, economic, civic, technological, and environmental change. As the most globally connected and digitally literate generation to ever live, they have unprecedented access to information. They are regularly exposed to the reality of complex global challenges such as climate change and pandemics, as well as conversations about the changing world of work.

In this rapidly changing world, where schools 'no longer have a monopoly over learning',ⁱ I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission regarding the purpose of public education. We need an approach to education that meets the challenges of the 21st century rather than the certainties of the 20th century and acknowledges that what is fit-for-purpose now may not be fit-for-purpose in ten years' time.

Drawing on my direct engagement with children and young people across South Australia, this submission focuses on what is required to achieve the following purpose statement:

To meet the unique characteristics of learning in the 21st century, the purpose of public education is to embrace and chart an active role in developing shared community respect for, and understanding of, the continuing value of collective school-based learning. Specifically, public education should:

- **Scaffold and nurture all children so they act in fair, kind, and just ways.**
- **Develop aptitude, attitudes, and abilities so children and young people can contribute to their worlds to the best of their abilities.**
- **Provide opportunities to contribute and be included in their schools and communities.**
- **Inspire children to continue learning (become lifelong learners) and be hopeful for their future.**

In addition, public education must intentionally aim to reduce the gaps in opportunities, achievements, health and well-being outcomes that occur as a result of individual child and family challenges and the broader structural factors impacting on South Australian communities.

Background and summary of recommendations

A good education is critical to the future of every child and young person and is integral to the realisation of many other rights. As such, access to education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Public education should reduce rather than reinforce disadvantage; prioritise connection and community rather than divide; foster kindness and collaboration rather than competition; and promote creativity, agency and empathy, inspiration, and imagination rather than compliance and standardisation.

As you are aware, my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to advocate at a systemic level for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia, particularly those whose

voices are not usually heard. Since 2017, I have engaged directly with thousands of children and young people across South Australia. Through my regular interactions with children and young people, I have a privileged insight into children and young people's views on schools and the education system.

Unlike previous generations, children and young people expect education to deliver more than developing skills they need to get a job. They are seeking knowledge and skills to become active and kind citizens, and to effectively engage in and contribute to their community throughout their lives.

In the implementation of the above purpose statement, all children and young people in South Australia, regardless of who they are and where they live, should have equal access to public education that:

- 1. Views children and young people as citizens and contributors now and in the future, promoting inspiration and imagination, supporting aspirations, and focusing on social, emotional, physical, and cognitive wellbeing and development.**
- 2. Respects and promotes children and young people's rights, with high expectations and equitable access to opportunities for all children and young people.**
- 3. Partners with homes and local communities and prioritises meaningful connections and relationships within and beyond the classroom, recognising that learning takes place everywhere.**

I commend the Department's widespread consultation on this issue, particularly the student forums. I hope that this will lead to a clearly articulated purpose of public education that is supported by values and principles and widely understood among students, families, educators, schools, and the wider community.

The purpose should also be used to inform decision-making and data collection about curriculum and school policies, structure, and environments. Without a clearly articulated purpose, the focus will continue to be on meeting narrow and standardised definitions of success, without considering local contexts and structural factors that shape the issues facing different schools and communities and children's and families' lives.

If you have any questions regarding this submission, please do not hesitate to contact this office.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Connolly', with a stylized, flowing script.

Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People South Australia

1. Views children and young people as citizens and contributors now and in the future, promoting inspiration and imagination, supporting aspirations, and focusing on social, emotional, physical, and cognitive wellbeing and development.

Across regions, school sectors, genders, and age groups, children and young people want schools to be places where:

- They are known.
- They are valued.
- They have a voice.
- They can see the value in what they are doing.

Consistent with these asks is research that explores the direct relationship between wellbeing and learning.ⁱⁱ Children and young people say that they are more likely to be motivated, engaged and positive about their future when they feel understood heard, safe, and supported.

Children and young people also want to understand ‘why’ they’re learning or doing a particular activity or lesson, and how it connects to ‘the real world’ and their future, including potential study or career pathways. They want to see themselves reflected in curriculum content that includes multiple points of view and explores multiple ways of knowing.

“Our education system needs to focus on teaching students about the world, not how to get a good grade. There’s no grades in life, but there are morals, failures and successes, and education should overarching teach us how to deal with them.”

– 14 year old

“Understand that the young generations are growing up in a world of concern, it is after all our future that we have little say in at the moment, which causes stress and worry for what our future holds.”

– 17 year old

“Make school tasks use more imagination so kids can do what they do best.”

– 11 year old

Education should prepare all children and young people to navigate life ‘in the real world’ beyond school. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of schools as places that go beyond academic instruction, and as places that foster opportunities, relationships, and skills that are critical to children and young people’s health, safety, wellbeing, confidence, and aspirations. Children and young people are looking for the tools to live independently, to manage finances, navigate relationships, and understand sexual health.

Results from the National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship (the NAP-CC) indicate that significant numbers of children and young people are making it through their years of schooling without learning about the systems and communities they live in and the democratic processes that affect their lives. Improving the consistency and quality of

civics and citizenship education should be a priority. Beyond this, schools should be viewed as 'democratic arenas' where children and young people can 'practise democracy in their day-to-day school life'.ⁱⁱⁱ Some of the most successful civic education policies and programs:

- allow children to be active participants rather than solely the recipients of knowledge;
- strengthen relationships between children, educators, schools, and broader communities, and use resources beyond the classroom (see Recommendation 3);
- focus on media literacy and digital citizenship.^{iv}

Underpinning the purpose of public education is a belief in the potential of all children and young people to become inspired to learn, strive for excellence, and achieve good outcomes for themselves and by extension the community and society. The education system should be viewed as a journey and any transitions within this journey should be carefully considered to ensure continued connection throughout the years.

Children and young people describe 'mentally healthy' schools as places that promote social, emotional and physical as well as cognitive development and wellbeing. Beyond promoting mental health literacy and access to services, this means providing safe, secure, and predictable environments that respect children's rights, and foster the value of learning, high achievement, excellence, engagement, and leadership.

"academic focus, and personal wellbeing, instead of focusing on only one which can often affect a students overall performance. Things such as mental health may be more promoted, and this ties in with (with) academic success."

– 15 year old, female

"Having more than 5 minutes to discuss my future plans with teachers, knowing where to look up or ask about more information instead of it being told lots of irrelevant information, having people actively care about my future."

– 17 year old, female

Currently, the education system focuses on individual success and appears to 'favour certain subjects, certain intelligences and therefore certain students over others'.^v Yet children and young people are looking to careers and futures where they can help others and improve society. As such, exploration, experimentation, imagination, adaptability, resilience, and determination should be central to education that supports children and young people to treat other people and the planet with respect.

My annual Student Voice Postcards project highlights that children and young people's career aspirations are formed early on.^{vi} Yet, careers education and counselling comes too little and too late in the middle-senior years of schooling. Public education should seek to support aspirations, including through addressing the structural inequities to realise aspirations and recognising the importance of teacher-student relationships based on respect, trust and listening.

The amenities and physical condition of a school also have an effect on children and young people's ability to learn and their outcomes.^{vii} Physical school environments are connected to children and young people's feelings of belonging and wellbeing and their

participation in extracurricular activities, with many children and young people highlighting the importance of spaces designed for play and physical activity as well as quiet spaces where they can go to just ‘chill out’.

Having access to good facilities can positively affect children and young people’s learning and confidence. In my experience of visiting hundreds of schools, I have seen the disparities between different public schools in terms of access to basic facilities like computers and toilets, let alone state-of-the-art STEM or sporting facilities.

“To tell schools that the children should be able to choose what new facilities we want so we can have a better learning environment.”

– 11 year old

2. Respects and promotes children and young people’s rights, with high expectations and equitable access to opportunities for all children and young people.

Articulating the importance of equity in a statement on the purpose of public education is a first step. Public education must intentionally aim to reduce the gaps in opportunities, achievements, health and well-being outcomes that occur as a result of individual child and family challenges and the broader structural factors impacting on South Australian communities.

Children and young people have consistently told me that they want all children and young people to have equitable access to opportunities, particularly for those who are “doing it tough”. They are aware that ‘social background is too often a key predictor of educational and future success’.^{viii}

There are particular barriers that disproportionately impact the educational engagement and outcomes for particular groups of children, including children and young people:

- living in poverty.
- living with disability.
- living with chronic illnesses.
- with caring responsibilities.
- LGBTQIA+ children and young people.
- affected by parental incarceration.
- in out-of-home care.
- from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Nuanced responses and supports are needed to consider the rights of these groups of children and make active efforts across schools and local communities to address the barriers impacting their outcomes, and to collect consistent data in order to measure their progress and support over time. This also means actively addressing discrimination and embedding gender equality and cultural safety into all aspects of education.

“Improve education – in general, rise standards of education – Equal opportunities for all children, no matter where you live, how much money you have. Improve education in rural areas.”

– 15 year old

"Increased focus and understanding for students who need help e.g., students behind in their schoolwork, students with learning difficulties, students with mental illness, and students with troubled home lives. This could be done by helpers within the school, organized study groups, and/ or by incorporating helping these students specifically into teacher training. This would need to be done with sensitivity because students may want help, but not want to be seen as different/less intelligent by the rest of the class."

– 18 year old, female

a) Children and young people living in poverty

"Being poor as a young adult more impacts yourself and future perception. You can see plans you had when you were younger failing, and struggling to find work stops being a smaller annoyance and starts being an existential threat. You feel like you are using up peoples good will to survive but not improve"

– 17 year old

Child poverty is real, and in a country of relative abundance, it should not and must not be tolerated. In South Australia, 1 in 4 children and young people under 18 years of age are estimated to be living in the state's most disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, compared to 18.5% nationally.^{ix}

Poverty has a significant impact on children and young people's learning, their full participation and connection with their school, community, and extracurricular activities, as well as their friendships and sense of belonging. food, digital devices, period products, and health care. The impacts of poverty continue into adulthood, with children living in poverty also more likely to leave school early and have difficulty transitioning from education to work or formal post-school education.

If equity is central to the purpose of public education, these impacts can be addressed. I encourage you to consider the following reports based on my engagement with children and young people about their lived experiences of the multiple dimensions of poverty:

- [Leave No One Behind – Poverty Report](#)
- [Menstruation Matters – The impact of menstruation on wellbeing, participation and school attendance](#)
- [My Digital Life – Understanding the impact of digital poverty on children and young people](#)
- [Spotlight on the True Cost of Going to School](#)

b) Children and young people living with disability

We know that children living with disability are disproportionately excluded or are pushed into FLO streams. It is commendable that the government is increasing resourcing to

support this group of students and their educators. However, to see long term change, we need for this to continue, so resourcing and subsequent cultural change in schools becomes the “norm” rather than the exception.

"Some schools exclude 'cause they don't know how to handle kids learning disabilities or that their behavioural issues are from a specific condition or diagnosis - and they don't have the funds or staff to make adjustments for that kid to learn how that kid needs to learn, which might be different from the mainstream. So I think some schools discriminate and put the kid in a 'too hard basket' when in fact they need to just think outside the mainstream box and find other ways that kid can learn."

This office has talked to children and families about the challenges they have with schools to keep their children feeling safe and connected. Many children living with disability are unfairly excluded from school and learning. My reports that address the barriers and also make recommendations include:

- [The Blame Game – Perspectives from children and young people on the impact of school exclusions](#)
- [From Checkbox to Commitment – What children and young people living with disability, inclusion and independence](#)

c) Children and young people with chronic illnesses

"The loss is not just education; it's being isolated from very important stages of learning relationships. You quickly become invisible and things in common fall away. The brief time that may be spent with peers, perhaps online, is a snippet of the day. Appearing well for a short time does not show the collapse afterwards, the complete loss of function. Young people need help to understand the gravity of the situation."

– 16 year old, male

Living with chronic illness disrupts and impacts on all aspects of a child's development and outcomes, including their attendance and engagement at school. Childhood chronic illness is a complex issue, with each illness having its own unique trajectory and impacts.

In 2022, I created a survey for children and young people with chronic illnesses to share their insights and experiences of managing chronic illness at school. Over 90 children and young people responded to the survey, and half reported that they missed out on school 'a lot of the time'. When at school, students with chronic illness described a range of barriers to their engagement and participation, including a lack of knowledge and understanding from teachers and peers, difficulties accessing medication, as well as managing severe pain, exhaustion, or medication side effects.

My Issues Brief, [South Australian children and young people's experiences of living with chronic illness](#), covers the complexities and challenges faced by this group and should be considered when making the purpose statement a reality for all children and young people.

d) Children and young people with caring responsibilities

Children and young people with caring responsibilities provide care for family members who may be living with either one or a combination of physical disability, chronic illness, mental illness, terminal illness, or drug and alcohol dependence.

Although many young carers describe their caring role as a positive experience, caring can place significant physical and mental strain on a child's wellbeing and attendance and engagement at school, particularly where a young carer is inadequately supported.

Although I have engaged directly with many young carers and the carer support agencies they interact with, there are many more students across our communities who are caring for family members but who don't tell anyone this is what they do – not their friends, teachers, or neighbours – ultimately meaning they are not being adequately supported to live the best life they can.

Governments and schools have a duty and obligation to understand the issues facing this group of children and support them to access the services and have the same opportunities as their peers. Currently, support for young carers at school is inconsistent and often too vested in the goodwill of individual teachers rather than whole-of-school or systemic approaches.

I encourage the Department to consider the recommendations in my [Take Care](#) Report, which highlights specific and practical actions schools and educators can take to best support young carers at school and improve attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and learning outcomes.

e) LGBTQIA+ children and young people

Although there are noted examples of schools that actively promote and practice inclusivity, many LGBTQIA+ young people have described feeling unsafe in school environments and raised concerns about the barriers they face to feeling known, valued, included and heard at school.

While some LGBTQIA+ young people focus on the impact of formal school exclusions, the most common concerns relate to the cumulative impact of day-to-day experiences of indirect and direct discrimination in school environments where they are harassed, made fun of, shamed, ignored, excluded, 'othered' or 'publicly outed'.

"Treating them differently to others and preferring the 'straight' kids over the ones they know to be a part of the lgbt+."

– 17 year old

Findings from Australia's largest study of health and wellbeing among LGBTQIA+ young people, the *Writing Themselves In* national survey, show that school is the most likely place for abuse and discrimination to occur and that this impacts educational outcomes. More than three-fifths (60.2%) of LGBTQIA+ secondary students reported feeling

uncomfortable or unsafe at school due to their sexuality or gender identity, and more than one-third (38.4%) reported missing days of school in the past 12 months due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable.^x

My [No Exceptions](#) report and my guide to building [LGBTQIA+ Inclusive School Environments](#) provide key insights from children and young people on what cultural and structural changes are needed to ensure schools are safe for all students.

f) Children and young people affected by parental incarceration

Parental incarceration has significant impacts on children and young people's relationships, health, wellbeing, and education, including their attendance, participation, and achievement at school.

My [Join the Dots](#) report is based on my consultation with this vulnerable and largely invisible group of children. Children with incarcerated parents reported that their 'grades went down' or they had 'trouble' at school as they dealt with overwhelming emotions and disruption to their lives outside of school.

Some young people described how their school 'didn't care' or didn't respond appropriately, and others wished their school would have 'let me have time' or worked with them to ensure their response 'matched the situation'. Despite negative experiences at school, most young people felt it was important for teachers and schools to know about students affected by parental incarceration in order to be able to support their wellbeing and keep them connected to learning.

While schools are likely to be aware of students whose parents are offenders in high profile cases, schools are not automatically informed by the courts or correctional services when a child's parent is sent to prison. As such, it is difficult for schools to understand children's needs and respond appropriately with information or support services.

There is an opportunity for the Department to work with other agencies and service providers to identify children and young people affected by parental incarceration and ensure educators and schools are equipped and prepared to provide timely, appropriate, and practical support.

g) Children and young people in out-of-home care

Children and young people in out-of-home care can face significant barriers to school attendance and negative experiences at school, which can impact attendance, social connections, academic achievement and school completion. My [Child Voice and Participation submission to the Review of the Children and Young \(Safety\) Act 2017](#) provides further insight into the views and experiences of children in care.

Schools often lack expertise to support children and young people who are dealing with the impacts of trauma and placement instability. Children in care are also disproportionately impacted by school suspensions and exclusions, with South Australian data showing that students in care are suspended at a rate four times higher than students who are not in care.^{xi}

The *Mparntwe Declaration* includes ‘learners in out-of-home care’ as a group requiring targeted support.^{xii} The *National Standards for Out-of-Home Care and Australia’s National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031* recognise access to education as a fundamental right that is key to improving life outcomes for children in care.^{xiii}

The Department can build on these existing policies with a commitment to practical measures and policy initiatives that support children in out-of-home care, and involve collaboration across education and child protection systems.

h) Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds can face significant barriers to education and employment. The National Settlement Services Outcomes Standards note that schools and teachers should be responsive to the education challenges faced by newly arrived young people, which ‘are distinct to those of their Australian born and non-migrant peers’.^{xiv}

These challenges include the prevalence and impact of racism and discrimination in schools and workplaces; a lack of professional and informal support networks; lack of recognition of experience or qualifications; language and communication difficulties; and insufficient information about the support available inside and outside of schools.

Public education should give effect to children and young people’s right to connect with and practice their culture (Article 30 of the UNCRC). Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their parents have told me they would like to have opportunities to learn more about South Australia’s public education system, for schools and employers to promote cultural diversity and cultural safety, for stronger collaborations between schools and communities, and for greater diversity in curriculum content and staff in education and other services.

Co-written with the Australian Migrant Resource Centre, the [Leading for our Future](#) and [Tapping into Our Talents](#) Reports provide further insight into ensuring public education promotes equitable outcomes for children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

3. Partners with homes and local communities and prioritises meaningful connections and relationships within and beyond the classroom, recognising that learning takes place everywhere.

Schools are often isolated from the wider local community. To realise the purpose of public education, there is an opportunity for schools to become ‘hubs’ that are properly integrated into communities and open to all. This includes bringing community resources and services into education settings, while also providing children and young people with opportunities to go out into communities.

This requires partnerships with councils, public libraries, local businesses, health practitioners, and community organisations. Such partnerships will enhance children and young people’s experiences of civics and citizenship education, work experience, and

climate change education. Including and empowering families and services across the community and connecting them with schools to improve public education schools will also build trust.

Schools alone do not have the resources to support the many children who are starting school hungry, stressed, or otherwise not ready to learn. With adequate resourcing and in collaboration with other agencies and services, schools should be supported to provide food, engage families with health and other services, and to ensure school playgrounds and facilities are open to the public after hours and during the holidays.

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