

Chapter 1

Highlights of 1999

Revision of the National Goals for Schooling

The National Report on Schooling in Australia: 1998

referred to the considerable progress that had been made towards the revision of the national goals. In 1999, the process was completed and the new set of goals was adopted by Ministers at the MCEETYA meeting held in Adelaide in April 1999.

As well as endorsing the new statement of goals, Ministers affirmed MCEETYA's commitment to the national reporting of comparable education outcomes. They further agreed that the new statement of goals would provide an appropriate framework for this reporting. In order to focus the nature of the reporting, the Ministers decided to identify some priority areas that would provide a basis for reporting in the first stage. The priority areas identified were:

- literacy
- numeracy
- student participation, retention and completion
- vocational education and training in schools
- science
- information technology.

The Ministers recognised the need to undertake some preliminary work in order for the reporting process to be effective. In particular, it was necessary to produce key performance indicators for each of the six priority areas. Additionally, Ministers determined that, where appropriate, national targets and benchmarks should be developed for those performance indicators.

To facilitate this process, MCEETYA established the National Education Performance Monitoring Taskforce. The

taskforce was constituted with representation from education authorities in all States and Territories, the Commonwealth, and Catholic and independent schools, along with representatives from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Taskforce on School Statistics and the Productivity Commission.

The fundamental purposes underlying the Ministers' intentions in revising the goals are apparent in the following extracts from the preamble that accompanies the new statement.

Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision.

This statement of national goals for schooling provides broad directions to guide schools and education authorities in securing these outcomes for students.

It acknowledges the capacity of all young people to learn, and the role of schooling in developing that capacity. It also acknowledges the role of parents as the first educators of their children and the central role of teachers in the learning process.

Common and agreed goals for schooling establish a foundation for action among State and Territory governments with their constitutional responsibility for schooling, the Commonwealth, non-government school authorities and all those who seek the best possible educational outcomes for young Australians, to improve the quality of schooling nationally.

These national goals provide a basis for investment in schooling to enable all young people to engage effectively with an increasingly complex world.

This world will be characterised by advances in information and communication technologies, population diversity arising from international mobility and migration, and complex environmental and social challenges.

The new reporting processes will enable MCEETYA, as well as the general community, to monitor progress towards the achievement of the new goals. MCEETYA already has performance targets and benchmarks in place for some areas and the development of others in new areas will further enhance the effectiveness of this monitoring.

The National Report will remain the main vehicle for the reporting process and its format will change to accommodate the new requirements. Future editions of this report will be prepared around a framework that reflects the priority areas identified by Ministers, as well as taking account of the desire for the reporting of nationally comparable learning outcomes information.

National reporting of literacy benchmark results

For the first time in the history of Australian schooling, this edition of the National Report contains nationally comparable data concerning the reading performance of year 3 and year 5 students, measured against national benchmarks. This represents a very significant step in the monitoring of educational outcomes in priority areas.

The reporting is part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan that was adopted by Ministers in 1997, and which has been implemented progressively since that time. When the plan has been fully implemented, the reporting will cover reading, writing, spelling and aspects of numeracy in years 3, 5 and 7, and in all sectors of schooling.

Appendix 2 describes the performance of year 3 and year 5 students, measured against the reading benchmark. Like the benchmarks that have been produced for other aspects of literacy and numeracy, it represents the nationally agreed minimum acceptable standard needed to enable a student to make reasonable progress at school. The benchmarks have been developed using a process that involved wide consultation with stakeholders and with literacy experts. They were extensively trialled in all States and Territories before students were tested using rigorous, State-based assessment regimes.

A nationally agreed procedure was developed to equate State and Territory tests and to ensure the reporting of student achievement data was comparable. An expert group developed and tested the equating process and decided that the reading results were highly comparable and therefore suitable for publication. The group is continuing to develop the process for other benchmark measurements and further results will be available for publication in the near future.

The results indicate that 87 per cent of the year 3 and almost 86 per cent of the year 5 students who were assessed were performing at or above the benchmark level. While the apparent differences between States and Territories are difficult to assess because of differences in the populations that were tested, differences between male and female students and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were very marked.

Because the benchmark represents a minimum acceptable standard, Education Ministers have set a target that all students should achieve at least the benchmark level of performance. The 1999 results indicate that there is still considerable progress to be made before this target is approached. The other elements of the National Literacy Plan are designed to enable this progress to be made and already, some jurisdictions are reporting significant gains among their lowest achieving groups.