Teach values and skills? Yes, Ministers

VALUES AS WELL AS SKILLS SHOULD DRIVE THE EDUCATIONAL AGENDA, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

IN SEPTEMBER, THE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL on Employment, Education, Training and Youth quietly issued its draft National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. It hasn’t received wide publicity, but I commend it to you as it spells out goals and directions, and enunciates critical values and beliefs around which school planning should occur. In our development of school strategic directions it’s critical that we first address what we are seeking to deliver before we even begin to discuss how this is to occur.

The Declaration holds that values as well as skills should drive the educational agenda. The outcomes sought are successful learners, confident individuals, and active and informed citizens. Schools are not just academic institutions; they are to be viewed in terms of the personal and community context. The personal addresses resilience, tolerance and ingenuity, and the community addresses responsible local and global citizens who work for the common good across cultures. Schooling should contribute to a socially cohesive society.

The Declaration takes Australians out of their island isolation and addresses cultural attitudes. It wants students to be ‘Asia literate,’ appreciating social, cultural and religious diversity, and capable of resolving disputes peacefully. The Declaration rightly wants students to value their Australian culture and to reach out to others because they have a strong sense of personal and community identity.

The Declaration openly acknowledges that too many young Australians are inadequately equipped with life skills including basic literacy and numeracy. It recognises inequality in educational outcomes, with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds missing out. It notes that Year 12 or equivalent completion rates are low by international standards. Outcomes for Indigenous students are unacceptably low.

As for information and communication technology, the Declaration admits that there is ‘some knowledge’ in schools, but that schools need to make a ‘quantum leap’ in embedding technologies in learning over the next few years. There have been some fundamental changes in the ways students learn as the result of new technologies. This needs to find expression in schools. Technology has delivered power to consumers in society, but not yet to students in schools.

There’s an acknowledgement of the need to compete on the world stage in the creation of knowledge and the ability to innovate. Students need to be able to think critically, analyse and solve problems. Specifically, the Declaration urges the development of critical cross-disciplinary thinking.

Some Australian leaders are still finding it hard to address sustainability issues and this is true of this document. Only brief mention is made of stewardship of the natural environment and climate change. Will we have a habitable world in which to live in 50 years unless we take some significant actions now? Generation Z in our schools right now could well be the last generation – but they could also be the generation that saves the planet if we make it a focus of study.

It’s good to see the emphasis on partnerships with community and businesses. What’s even more important, though, is the commitment to engage parents in planning and supporting their child’s progress through school, but why not make it more open-ended support for a child’s learning however, wherever? If we’re really serious about addressing inequality then we may need to support personal learning plans for a range of students, including failing or disadvantaged young people, which may not include the local school. In 2008, it’s surely wrong to assume that education provision is necessarily through a system of schooling.

The Declaration addresses other issues that space does not allow me to address in detail, including early childhood education, school transitions, improving the quality of teaching and school leadership, curriculum and assessment, and accountability and transparency.

The Declaration, in my reading, acknowledges that we don’t need more of the same; we need to significantly rethink what happens in schools. We live in a period of rapid economic, technological and social change, so the Declaration rightly wants the focus of learning to be on both social and cognitive skills so that graduates can work together flexibly and creatively. Given that globalisation, and fragmented and fractured societies are also today’s reality, our emphasis needs to be on social and citizenship skills, tolerance and social responsibility. Our young people need both values and skills.


David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is Jousting for the New Generation: Challenges to contemporary schooling, published by ACER Press. Email davidloader@bigpond.com