

# National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

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## Submission form

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Thank you for taking the time to consider the draft National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

Your comments are a valuable contribution to the development of the new Declaration which will set out our goals for the next 10 years.

You can use this form to respond to the focus questions about the draft Declaration and add any comments. You can answer as many (or as few) of the questions as you like.

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## A. Your details

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Please enter your contact details in the space provided (optional)

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I'm interested because I'm a (eg parent, teacher):	Speech Pathology Australia is the peak body representing speech pathologists in Australia. Speech pathologists possess expertise and specialised knowledge and training in normal and delayed/disordered speech, language, communication and swallowing. As such, the profession believes it is ideally placed to provide valuable feedback regarding the 'National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians'.

## B. Focus questions

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

Speech Pathology Australia considers the 'Educational Goals' to be well defined and identify a number of key educational outcomes for young Australians. However, the Association believes it imperative that together with literacy and numeracy skills, well-developed speech, language and communication skills be specifically identified and highlighted as educational goals. Speech, language and communication skills are not only essential for successful life-long learning but are also important in contributing to the confidence and life skills of individuals.

Oral language and speech competence need to be front-of-mind in children's early learning and education, as this is critical to literacy and learning skills, as well as social and emotional development. Early childhood educational goals must target foundation competencies that sustain development of rich social and academic abilities throughout the school years and into adulthood. Oral language competency is known to underpin the transition to literacy. There is strong evidence that preschool oral language deficits may predispose a child to ongoing reading difficulties throughout childhood and adolescence (Speech Pathology Australia, 2005). The link between speech and language competence and developing positive peer relationships is supported by the research, with poor speech and language competence contributing to poor social skills and impacting on the younger child's sense of self value in the classroom setting. Speech and language disorders not only lead to difficulty in acquiring literacy and to poor long term achievement, but are also associated with reduced employment options, social, emotional and behavioural problems across the life span, mental health problems, and criminal behaviour leading to juvenile offending and imprisonment (Snow and Powell, 2004).

### 2. Are there other educational goals we should consider?

As outlined above, it is imperative that the importance of speech and language in the attainment of the 'Educational Goals' is recognised - in its own right, but also as the foundation for literacy and life-long successful learning. Research indicates that in Australian communities, a conservative figure of 10% of children are developmentally vulnerable in their language and cognitive development, including basic literacy skills, and/or in their communication skills (including participation with other children and ability to understand others), by the time they start school; this may be as high as 33% in some Australian communities (Centre for Community Child Health, 2007). Around 20% of children may be slow to develop spoken language (Reilly, Wake & Bavin et al, 2007), and for 50% of these children, language problems persist into the early years (Law, Boyle, Harris et al, 2000). Across the primary and secondary years, communication disorders (including any or all of difficulties with: understanding and using language; social communication, speech, voice and fluency) affect as many as 12-13% of Australian children (McLeod & McKinnon, 2007). A body of evidence also exists which shows that academic success, including literacy, is a protective factor against a range of psychosocial harms which can include truancy, early school leaving, substance abuse and juvenile offending (Snow & Powell, 2004; Smart, Vassallo, Sanson et al, 2003).

### 3. Do the 'Commitments to Action' address the right outcomes?

The statement "We know that by taking a personalised approach to learning and giving every young Australian the educational support they require.....we can achieve high-quality educational outcomes for all our young people"(p. 7) is a commendable one. However, unless there is due consideration given to strategies to ensure early identification of children at risk, and provision of access to adequate

services for children, any actions to address this statement will not be realised.

Speech pathologists possess the expertise and specialised knowledge and training to provide these services. However, the speech pathology services available to Australian children to remediate speech and language disorders are inadequate and inconsistent. Service availability differs from state to state. Within states, the level of service available may be dependent on the age of the child and/or the school the child attends. This is of significant concern given the demonstrated link between speech and language disorders, difficulties acquiring literacy and poor long term educational outcomes. Schools need to have access to speech pathology services and to make use of these services so as to strengthen language skills as an essential learning competence and a protective factor for all Australian children.

Speech Pathology Australia advocates for the development and implementation of a national quality framework for early childhood education that supports learning from the earliest age. Strong evidence exists to show that children aged 0 to 3 years derive long term benefit from programs that support a family's capacity to provide a positive learning environment. Both national and international research has clearly demonstrated a link between early childhood development and school readiness, academic performance, employability and social integration (McCain & Mustard, 1999). The implementation of a national framework for early childhood education would facilitate the timely recognition of a child's needs and provide the opportunity for prompt intervention and support for both the child and family (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008). Speech Pathology Australia would encourage MCEETYA to consider extending their 'commitment to action' to include services and programs that specifically identify and provide services for preschool children. Early identification means quickly recognising a child's difficulties and ensuring prompt intervention to support both the child and family before they enter the formal education environment. In addressing the management of speech, language and communication needs, The Bercow Report (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008) states "there is strong clinical opinion about the value of early intervention and the danger of its absence. If a child receives the right help early on, he or she has a better chance of tackling problems, communicating well and making progress. If a child does not benefit from early intervention, there are multiple risks which may become evident over a period of years" (p. 24).

Speech Pathology Australia urges the adoption of a national policy that mandates the provision of an appropriate level of speech pathology services for all children. Such a policy, when linked to the National Curriculum, would reduce the social, emotional, educational and employment disadvantage borne by children with speech, language and learning difficulties, and would result in long term economic benefit and workforce and capacity building of the Australian community. An opportunity exists to integrate child support services, including speech pathology, across the early childhood and middle years, and create a dynamic and integrated service where communication and service planning can be enhanced at both the individual child and systems levels. It is essential that there is a coordinated pathway of services for children with specific speech, language and learning needs, from early identification to the completion of their schooling. The speech pathologist working alongside parents, teachers and integration aids to provide support and training is a critical part of the overall management of a child who requires specialised assistance with speech and language learning.

In relation to 'Improving outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds' (p.11-12), the National Declaration rightly refers to the importance of improving outcomes for children from Indigenous and Torres Strait Island communities, and those from disadvantaged and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Research demonstrates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have an increased incidence of delayed speech and language skills by the time they commence school. They also have lower representation in early intervention programs. Speech Pathology Australia believes it important that recognition also be afforded to the challenges facing children from linguistically diverse backgrounds, and the 'Educational Goals for Young Australians' recognise the extremely important role that maintenance of a first language plays in long term educational outcomes. Speech Pathology Australia strongly advocates for active and inclusive dialogue with Indigenous communities and those from

disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds so as to facilitate their meaningful engagement in relation to current and future education initiatives.

4. Are there are other 'Commitments to Action' we should consider?

Speech Pathology Australia urges MCEETYA to commit more specific actions within the Declaration to children with disabilities so as to ensure children with special needs receive the support they require. The Association believes it essential that children with disabilities are afforded the same focus as that for children from disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Speech Pathology Australia supports the recognition of the importance of working with parents, carers and teachers so as to empower them as the key educators and interaction partners of young Australians. To this end, the Association believes that utilising the specialist skills and knowledge of speech pathologists in the training of teachers, families and early childhood educators is paramount. Teachers require knowledge and skills to understand and promote oral language and literacy development; however teachers should not be required to be experts in all facets of child development but rather should have access to professionals to assist them. Speech Pathology Australia strongly encourages Federal and State governments to consider the inclusion of speech pathologists in the development and provision of education programs aimed to meet this objective. As experts in all facets of language, literacy and communication development, speech pathologists should play a vital role in the development of training programs, and ensure that such programs meet a number of key criteria, including:

1. providing teachers/educators with skills to competently identify children with communication disorders;
2. providing teachers/educators with means to link children to appropriate services, including speech pathology services;
3. providing teachers/educators with knowledge to maximise opportunities for speech and language stimulation and learning in the everyday environment;
4. equipping teachers/ educators with the ability to provide linguistically and culturally sensitive education.

Further to this, the Association also advocates for continued support for parents and carers in relation to the development of speech, language, literacy and numeracy skills within the home. Speech pathologists have specialist skills and training from an evidence-based 'family-centered' model and are ideally placed to facilitate interaction between parents and children, and provide 'home interaction programs' which promote social interaction and speech and language development.

5. Please add any additional comments here:

Speech Pathology Australia applauds MCEETYA on its 'National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians' and believes the educational goals and actions to which it has committed are well chosen. However, The Association believes it imperative that the educational goals include reference to the importance of well developed speech, language and communication skills as key determinants to successful life-long learning.

Speech Pathology Australia strongly supports the development and implementation of a national framework for early education that supports learning from the earliest age.

Speech Pathology Australia strongly encourages MCEETYA to include speech pathology services as an

integral part of the plan for early education in order to maximise the benefit of utilising the knowledge and expertise of speech pathologists in the development and implementation of education programs for parents, carers and teachers.

The Association urges Federal and State governments to work together to ensure all students have equity of access to an appropriate level of service, regardless of where they live or the school they attend. Equity of access is paramount to meeting the educational goals of young Australians.

The Association looks forward to viewing details of the proposed Action Plan, specifically outlining the activities and initiatives to be undertaken to support the achievement of these educational goals for all young Australians.

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Please email or post completed submission forms and any additional comments and feedback to:

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