

P U B L I C
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IN  SOUTH
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Introducing the statement on public education

For nearly 150 years, public schools and preschool centres in South Australia have served important public purposes and they continue to do so. They enrich the lives of children and young people by helping them to reach their potential, contribute to the economy through work, and play an active role in civic life.

Underpinning these purposes are a number of important characteristics and values that provide public education with its distinctive tone and quality.

In 2016, the newly established Public Education Advisory Committee (PEAC) recommended to the minister and the chief executive that it develop a statement on public education, articulating and affirming the key characteristics of public education. It was agreed and, after extensive consultation, this statement has been released.

We believe that this is the first time in South Australian, and perhaps Australian, educational history where a public system has adopted a foundation statement that describes the essence of public education in order to guide its work.

In adopting the statement, we see it as having a range of important purposes. For example, it suggests a common language with which to discuss the basis and direction of our work in public education, and it provides reference points against which to judge policy and practice.

Importantly, it affirms to the community all those aspects of public education that contribute to enhancing the learning outcomes of the children and young people, and to building the common good. These are characteristics about which all in public education are justifiably proud.

It is important to stress that this statement should be seen as something that adds value to our work in the public system in South Australia, not as something that is imposed and adds to workload.

At the Corporate Office level it will inform planning documents such as strategic plans. At the local level, the statement will be used when schools and preschools decide that it will assist such aspects of their work as planning, policy making, teaching practice, parental engagement, and promotion of public education in the local community.

Support materials will be developed and distributed across the system. These will suggest ways in which the statement can be used for different purposes and with different audiences.

We hope that the statement will encourage discussion and debate across the system as together we grapple with the important question of how to maintain, enhance and promote the quality of our wonderful public education system.

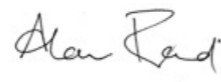
It is in that spirit that we commend this foundation statement to you.



Hon. Susan Close
Minister of Education



Rick Persse
Chief Executive, DECD



Professor Alan Reid
Chair, PEAC

Public education in South Australia¹

Our public education system is central to the development and wellbeing of South Australian and Australian society. Since its establishment in 1875, the system has expanded to comprise preschools², primary and secondary schools and, with two thirds of all school-aged students attending public schools, it is the main vehicle through which education is provided in the state.

As the society and economy evolved during the 20th and 21st centuries, South Australian public schools prepared an increasingly diverse student population for ever more complex roles as citizens, workers, and community members.

Public schools continue to fulfil this role with distinction, contributing to our culture, economy and democracy, and improving the life outcomes of children and young people.

The fractures developing in many societies around the world highlight the importance of a vibrant public education system. Public schools are public spaces where students from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences mix together, learn to appreciate and respect their differences, and develop the understandings and dispositions needed to contribute to democratic life in a multicultural society. Never before have such skills been so needed.

In these ways, over the past century and a half, South Australia's public education system has become one of the most precious institutions in our society, vital for the development of individuals and for community wellbeing and social cohesion.

1. This document was written by Professor Alan Reid with support from the Public Education Advisory Committee [Reid, A (2017)].

2. In this statement, the term 'schools' will be used to include pre-, primary and secondary public schools.

Foundations of public education

Public education is based on at least 3 foundational concepts which are unique to it.

Compulsory and free of tuition costs

Ever since the late 19th century in South Australia there has been community agreement that education is so important that it should be compulsory to a certain age. At the same time it is recognised that compulsion is impractical unless the government provides public schools free of tuition costs, available and accessible to all in every local community. In other words, public schools represent our community's serious commitment to the importance of education.

Universal

Universality is a distinctive core strength of public education. Making public schools available to all in every local community means that they are places of diversity and inclusion, accepting and educating students regardless of their economic circumstances, family backgrounds, abilities, geographic location, culture or beliefs.

Secular

The diversity of public schools means that they cannot be based upon a particular religious or cultural group. As public institutions, they are necessarily secular and multicultural, teaching students to engage with, critically understand and respect different cultures and beliefs in our society – particularly those of Australia's Indigenous nations – without favouring or emphasising a specific world view or set of cultural assumptions or practices.

In summary, a compulsory, universal and secular public education system, free of tuition costs, is integral to enhancing the individual life opportunities, and fulfilling the potential, of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also the major means by which our society can develop young people with the dispositions, values and skills to go beyond individual self-interest and contribute to the common good.

These are essential capabilities for citizens in any liberal democracy. It is for these reasons that public schools are at the heart of South Australia's education provision and community life.

Characteristics of public education

A number of specific characteristics of South Australian public education derive from the foundational concepts described above. These include:

Quality

The relentless pursuit of the highest quality education for all is a central tenet of public education in South Australia. This includes quality teaching, leadership, curriculum, resources, relationships and infrastructure – all of which must be of the highest standard to achieve and maintain educational excellence. High-quality public schools provide young people with the opportunity to reach their full potential, and the capabilities to live full, productive and contributing lives as citizens, workers and community members.

Equity

Since education is a fundamental human right, its outcomes should not result from differences in parental wealth, social status or influence. The South Australian public education system and its schools pursue equity through such strategies as providing focused support in teaching and learning and additional resources for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs. The aspiration is for a public system in which educational outcomes are determined by effort and skilled teaching, not by inequalities stemming from social location.

Diversity and cohesion

Since the public education system is available to all, South Australian public schools are sites of rich social and cultural diversity. International research shows that the greater the social mix of a school the better the educational outcomes, so the diversity of public schools enhances achievement for all.

In addition, this diversity delivers significant personal and social benefits for public school students. They can interact with peers from a wide range of backgrounds, and learn from lived experience to appreciate and respect difference. Such understanding is crucial to the development of the skills and dispositions needed to maintain and enhance a diverse yet cohesive multicultural society.

Collaboration and trust

Education is one of the major vehicles through which our society develops people who are capable of working together to achieve benefits for the whole community. Thus collaboration and trust are central features of a public education system. This applies not just to teaching and relationships at the individual level, but also to relationships between public schools. Rather than operating in isolation, the emphasis is on sharing and collaborating within and across schools to build the strength and quality of the whole public education system.

Community

Public schools exist within the local communities from which their student population is drawn, creating a bond between schools and their communities which fosters a powerful community spirit. The close links enable each community to use the facilities and resources of its public school to enhance local community life; and each public school to use the resources of the community to enhance its learning programs. The public school-community interaction enriches student learning, and fosters community cohesion.

Democracy

Education is one of the major vehicles for the development of capabilities for active participation in civic life. Public schools seek to exemplify and practise democracy at all levels by creating structures and processes that give an authentic voice to all in the school community. Students are encouraged to have a real say in their learning, and parents are provided with significant opportunities to participate in their child's education and to play a role in the life of the school. Since parental engagement is a significant factor affecting learning outcomes, public schools ensure that all parents have a voice, including the most economically and socially marginalised.

Benefits of public education

For nearly 150 years, public schools in South Australia have served a number of important public purposes and they continue to do so. They enrich the lives of children and young people by helping them to reach their potential, contribute to the economy through work, and play an active role in civic life.

But it is the characteristics and values of public education described in this statement that impart an important distinctiveness to the public purposes of education. They shape the culture and practices of the public system and so contribute to the quality of the educational experience and outcomes in a number of ways.

First, since public schools are open to all, they reject old-fashioned notions of exclusion, separateness or individual privilege. Instead, they are founded on philosophies such as inclusion, collectivity and community. These encourage the kinds of skills and dispositions suited to the present and future contexts of rapid change in a globalising world, while building more cohesive and equitable local communities.

Second, the characteristics of public schools contribute to an educational experience that equips young people with the capabilities for life in the 21st century. As well as being developed through formal education programs, the capabilities are built into the very essence of public education, so that students are able to observe them in action and practise them on a daily basis.

For example, students are assisted to aspire to the highest standards possible, think critically and creatively, work collaboratively, act ethically and responsibly, engage productively with difference, and develop a commitment to contribute to the broader common good, as well as their own personal development. In short, public schools offer an educational experience that meets the changing demands and contexts of 21st century society.

It is for these reasons that public education is a foundation stone of our democracy, and why every local community in South Australia is entitled to a well-resourced, secular, socially diverse and inclusive public school that provides a quality education, free of tuition costs, and open to all.

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This document has been authored by Professor Alan Reid
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[Reid, A (2017) Public Education in South Australia]