

## Executive Summary

This paper is the first in the Page Research Centre's 2026 Thematic Series: *Rethinking and Restating the Nature and Purpose of Australian School Education*.

Improving Australian school education policy and outcomes requires returning to first principles. Policymakers and educators must begin at the critical point at which the education of young Australians is currently determined: the national education goals. The goals have unequalled official status in education policy; however, the scale and complexity of contemporary challenges for schools, teachers and students put their real-world impact in doubt.

Australia's overarching education policy document is the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*. Endorsed by federal, state and territory education ministers in 2019, the *Declaration* claims 'a vision for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face'.

The *Declaration* identifies the two 'interconnected' national education goals.

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

- confident and creative individuals
- successful lifelong learners
- active and informed members of the community.

Schools and teachers are under pressure not only to improve teaching and learning but also 'to prepare young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex environmental, social and economic challenges'.

Those challenges are everywhere.. Multiple reports identify:

- unsatisfactory student performance in national and international academic testing
- inconsistent and ineffective academic standards and practices across the country
- inadequate teacher training and low morale in the profession
- disengaged and psychologically fragile students, and poor classroom behaviour
- low public confidence in Australian school education

Another marker of decline was seen in young Australians' performance in the 2024 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC). The results were the lowest since the triennial testing began in 2004:

- Year 6 students - 43% achieved the proficient standard, compared with 53% in 2019
- Year 10 students - 28% achieved the proficient standard, compared with 38% in 2019

Other research reveals young Australians' apparent disdain for democracy as a system of government, reluctance to defend this country and its way of life, and the growing appeal of extremist influencers. Unmotivated and underprepared, they are unlikely to meet national policy expectations of developing 'flexibility, resilience, creativity, and the ability and drive to keep on learning throughout their lives'.

Crucially, there is no clear line of sight from the national education goals to the *Declaration's* claim that:

Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing **economic prosperity** and **social cohesion**.

The goals lack a sophisticated rationale to justify their selection and place them in a distinctively Australian historico-cultural context. Their generic language carries no distinctive national flavour, with the word *citizenship* used just once in the 20-page document.

By contrast, the world's most consistently successful education system prioritises a simultaneous emphasis on academic rigour and character and citizenship education (CCE) throughout primary and secondary school, with CCE having 'always been at the heart of our education system'.<sup>1</sup> Singapore's four Desired Outcomes of Education specify the development of 'Concerned citizens who are rooted to Singapore, are responsible to their family, community and nation and take active roles in improving the lives of others'.<sup>2</sup>

Rethinking Australia’s national education goals demands careful examination of best practice in other settings. To that end, it is helpful that the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* encourages partnerships with external organisations that ‘can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, promote a sense of responsible citizenship and encourage lifelong learning’.

One national youth development organisation offers an exemplar. The Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC) – affiliated with the Australian Defence Force – sets clear, unequivocal expectations for all participants. The work of the AAFC is contextualised for individuals at the organisational level, which is framed by the wider Royal Australian Air Force setting, in turn reinforcing national goals and values. The clarity of the expectations gives certainty to all members, families and other stakeholders, regardless of age, gender, background, or other characteristics. Unity of purpose and accountability to the organisation, to each other and to the wider community are both characteristics and outcomes.

Part I offers a broad description of some of the historic influences on Australian school education, particularly as these might be assumed to underpin the national education goals.

Part II describes the expectations and constraints of school education under Australia’s federal system of government, with specific reference to the subject of Civics and Citizenship.

Part III introduces the Australian Defence Force Cadets program, with its longstanding commitment to being one of Australia’s premier national youth development organisations. This paper places a specific emphasis on the historic and contemporary achievements of one branch, the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC).

Part IV discusses the data collected in a survey of 218 former Cadets regarding their experience as school-age Cadets and the extent to which they believe the program influenced their personal development. Even taking into consideration the respondents’ membership of an alumni network (a likely indicator of a good experience), their ratings and comments were overwhelmingly positive. For example, 98% either strongly agreed or agreed with the AAFC’s claim that it provides experiences that ‘equip for life’. Responses were considered and often quite detailed. Some examples follow.

*I consider my time in Cadets to be foundational in developing me into the person I am today. It instilled a deep sense of community mindedness, developed my leadership skills and was also pretty cool. I got to experience a lot of things other kids my age did not.* (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served for 8 years)

*One of the best times of my life, which I’ll never forget. I learnt a lot of useful skills and made some solid friends, which have lasted throughout my life. We really felt that we were part of the ADF, even though we were only Cadets.* (Male, NSW, joined at 15, served 2.5 years)

*My family / childhood was not great (alcoholic father who was abusive). Cadets was the one thing that kept me positive, it really gave me hope back then.* (Female, WA, joined at 13, served 5 years)

*Personally found failing exams and courses helped me to be a better person as an adult ... Always lived by the motto of “if you fail at something, you learn to pass it”. The AAFC had always helped me when I was a Cadet to learn how to pass something if I fail it the first time.* (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 5 years)

The paper concludes with a recommendation to review Australia’s national education goals, which are too generic to transmit a serious account of citizenship, character, and national belonging. They should be restated in language that clearly and powerfully reflects the intellectual, moral and civic purposes of schooling in this country.

