Horace Mann, the 19th century American educator, famously referred to education as “a great equaliser”. At a time when the magnitude of income inequality is threatening to tear the social fabric of many OECD countries, it is well worth reviewing our education systems to see whether and how well they are working to provide all students – not just those whose parents can afford it – a quality education.

As results from the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey attest, most countries would get an “incomplete” mark if they were graded on the level of equity in their education systems. Without equity in education opportunities, only some students will be able to progress through school having acquired basic knowledge and skills, only some will be able to fulfil their potential, only some will be able to fully participate in society later on. In other words, without equity in education, inequality in society is reinforced and perpetuated.

The fourth International Summit on the Teaching Profession, held in March 2014 in New Zealand, was devoted to the issues of excellence, equity and inclusiveness in education. Few subjects could be more timely. This report details the state of equity in education today and provides numerous examples of the innovative policies and practices that some countries have adopted to ensure that the widest possible population of students gets the best possible education.

The report was prepared by Andreas Schleicher, in consultation with the Summit co-sponsors – the New Zealand Ministry of Education and Education International. It is mainly based on data and comparative analysis from several OECD publications: PISA 2012 Results (Francesco Avvisati, Francesca Borgonovi, Miyako Ikeda, Guillermo Montt, Sophie Vayssettes and Pablo Zoido, authors; Simone Bloem and Giannina Rech, statistical support); Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools (Francisco Benavides, Pauline Musset, Anna Pons Vilaseca and Beatriz Pont, authors); and Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers (Phillip McKenzie and Paulo Santiago, authors). Marilyn Achiron edited the text, and Célia Braça-Schich and Elisabeth Del Bourgo co-ordinated production of the report, with the assistance of Meredith Lunsford.