



SCHOOL EDUCATION POLICY PAPER, 2019

Page Research Centre

By Dr. Fiona Mueller and Dr. Kevin Donnelly

School education outcomes in Australia are poor by international standards and are declining.

The Page Research Centre has commissioned this paper to summarize the state of school education in Australia today, and to offer policy solutions that aim at improving educational outcomes.

Regional and rural areas are disproportionately affected by declining education standards, so stand to benefit in particular from improvements to standards.

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Fiona speaks four languages and has decades of experience with linguistically and culturally diverse organisations and communities. After more than twenty years of teaching and leadership experience in secondary schools in Australia and overseas, she moved to a policy role with the New South Wales Board of Studies (now NESA). Her interest in the history of public schools and single-sex education – particularly in relation to academic choices and the capacity of schools to meet the needs of boys and girls – inspired her to undertake doctoral research into policy changes in Australian education since the late 19th century.

A former Operations Officer with the Royal Australian Air Force (Reserve), Fiona has a longstanding interest in defence, international relations, national security and immigration.

These areas of interest have been reflected in her teaching roles at the University of New South Wales (ADFA) and the Australian National University. She led the development of the core subject of Australian Studies at the Australian National University's ANU College, and as Head of College she carried responsibility for staff and students engaged in pre-tertiary, undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Fiona is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, based in the United Kingdom, and a longstanding member of the Australian College of Educators. She has been a member of the Teaching Expert Standing Committee of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and the University of Sydney's Teacher Education Advisory Board.

As Director of Curriculum at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Fiona worked closely with all states and territories and across all school sectors to support the implementation and refinement of the national curriculum. This responsibility involved building relationships with a wide range of social interest groups, business and employer organisations and professional associations at a national and international level, always with the intention of finding ways to support student engagement and academic development. At ACARA, Fiona led a major program of research to publish comparative studies of the Australian Curriculum with the curricula of some of the world's most successful education systems.

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Dr Kevin Donnelly is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Catholic University and one of Australia's leading education authors and commentators. Research interests include identifying the characteristics of stronger performing education systems and analysing various models of curriculum theory and implementation within an international context. Kevin is also a staunch defender of a liberal view of education within the context of Western civilisation.

Kevin taught English and Humanities for 18 years in Victorian government and non-government secondary schools. He has also been a member of state and national curriculum bodies, including: the Victorian Education Department's Post Primary English Committee and Post Primary Taskforce, the Year 12 English Panel of Examiners, the Victorian Board of Studies and the federally funded Discovering Democracy Programme and inquiry into the Australian Certificate of Education. In 2014 Kevin co-chaired the review of the Australian National Curriculum and in 2016 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to education.

1. School education in Australia

If then we recognize education as an initiation into a civilization, we may regard it as beginning to learn our way about a material, emotional, moral and intellectual inheritance, and as learning to recognize the varieties of human utterance and to participate in the conversation they compose.

Michael Oakeshott (1991, p.188)

In an increasingly challenging and competitive global environment, education is vital to the nation's economic development, financial security and prosperity.

The intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual aspects of education are also vital if students are to lead productive and fulfilled lives, understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens, recognize right from wrong, and appreciate the importance of contributing to the common good. Education is the single most effective means of ensuring that Australia remains a stable, peaceful and cohesive society.

A utilitarian, more practical view of education must be balanced against introducing students to what English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold describes as 'the best which has been thought and said'¹, meaning the type of learning that enables students to be culturally literate. For many generations, this has meant the provision of a high-quality, liberal education that draws on the established disciplines and areas of knowledge, all the while evolving and open to critique, that have stood the test of time.

School education represents a significant financial outlay to both levels of government, with recurrent expenditure, based on 2015-16 figures, totaling \$55.7 billion.² Of this, approximately 72% comes from the states and territories, which provide most funding for government schools. The federal government contributes approximately 28% of the total and is the major funder of non-government schools.³

Based on 2015-16 records, the states and territories provided 86.2% (\$36.5 billion) of the total recurrent funding received by state schools, with the federal government providing the remaining 13.8% (\$5.9 billion). The situation with Catholic and independent schools is reversed, with the commonwealth providing the lion's share at \$13.3 billion and the states and territories \$3.3 billion.⁴

State schools are fully funded by government and, in theory, free to parents, while non-government schools rely heavily on private income such as school fees, philanthropic support and other charges to families. Based on the 2016 calendar year, private non-government school income amounts to just under 60% of per capita recurrent and capital costs.⁵

¹ Arnold, A. (1968 Edition). *Culture and Anarchy*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press (p 6).

² Australian Productivity Commission. (2018). 'Report on Government Services 2018'. Canberra. Australian Government. (p 4.3).

³ Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2018). 'National Report on Schooling in Australia 2016'. ACARA, Sydney (p 26).

⁴ Ibid (p 27).

⁵ Ibid (p 35).

School funding, especially since the release of the 2011 *Review of Funding for Schooling* chaired by David Gonski⁶, is a politically sensitive and controversial issue with ongoing debates about what constitutes a fair, equitable and transparent funding model and how best to resolve the competing demands of the three school sectors and the two levels of government.

For example, whereas the Gonski-inspired model relies on parents' socioeconomic status (SES) to calculate the quantum of government support, the more recent report by the National School Resourcing Board proposes significant changes to improve transparency and equity. Chief among these is a shift from an SES model to one where non-government school parents' capacity to contribute is based on family income. The SES methodology uses census data collected by household, identifying postcode, parental qualifications, employment and income. The new model relies on an assessment of parental income calculated by the Australian Taxation Office.

Australia has a tripartite system of school education involving Catholic schools (approximately 20% of enrolments), independent schools (approximately 14%) and government schools (approximately 66%). Compared to overseas education systems, Australia has one of the highest levels of non-government school enrolments and, while there is some opposition, both parental choice and government funding of non-government schools have been supported by the major political parties since Sir Robert Menzies introduced state aid to Catholic schools in the 1960s.

Australia is one of relatively few countries with a federal system of government wherein constitutional responsibility for school education lies with the states and territories. As noted in the Report on Government Services 2018⁷:

State and territory governments are responsible for ensuring the delivery and regulation of schooling to all children of school age in their jurisdiction (and they determine curricula, register schools, regulate school activities and are directly responsible for the administration of government schools (p 4.2).

Although the Australian government neither manages any schools nor employs any staff, there has been a rapid escalation in federal involvement in education since the early 1970s. The Reform of Federation Discussion Paper 2015 notes that the Commonwealth 'has increased its role in schools over time as it has sought to give effect to its own policy objectives and fill the gaps left by State and Territory policies.'⁸

In addition to significant increases in funding, both in terms of recurrent funding to government and non-government schools and special purpose grants, the federal government has also taken the lead in implementing a series of national reforms in an attempt to raise standards and improve educational outcomes.

Such Initiatives include the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, introduced in 2008, and the associated My School

⁶ Australian Government. (2011). 'Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report' (otherwise known as the Gonski review of school funding). Canberra. Australian Government.

⁷ Australian Government. (2018). Ibid.

⁸ Australian Government. (2015). 'Reform of the Federation Discussion Paper 2015'. Canberra. Australian Government. (p 57).

website detailing schools’ results plus their sources of income. The Australian Curriculum, developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), identifies the learning areas and other areas of study for students in Foundation to Year 10. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), responsible for detailing the standards (or qualities) required for effective and successful professional practice, is another key element of this national education infrastructure.

The Commonwealth Government has also commissioned multiple formal reviews in an attempt to strengthen and improve Australia’s education system. These include a review of the national curriculum (2014), a review into teacher education (2015), a review of regional, rural and remote education (2018), a review into school funding (2018) and a review on how best to raise standards and improve educational outcomes (2018). They followed earlier investigations into international benchmarking of primary school English, mathematics and science subjects; boys’ education; the feasibility of a national senior school certificate and literacy education in the early years of primary school.

1.1 Challenges and concerns

The effectiveness of major investment in education in recent years, together with the implementation of initiatives such as the national curriculum and a national assessment and reporting regime, is now under scrutiny. A 2017 Productivity Commission report concluded that ‘In some critical areas, there are signs that Australia’s school system is not functioning well’, explaining that ‘the declining or stagnating results have occurred during a time of considerable policy focus on schooling, including significantly increased expenditure.’⁹ The graph below reinforces the argument, based on expenditure and PISA results, that increased investment does not necessarily lead to improved outcomes.

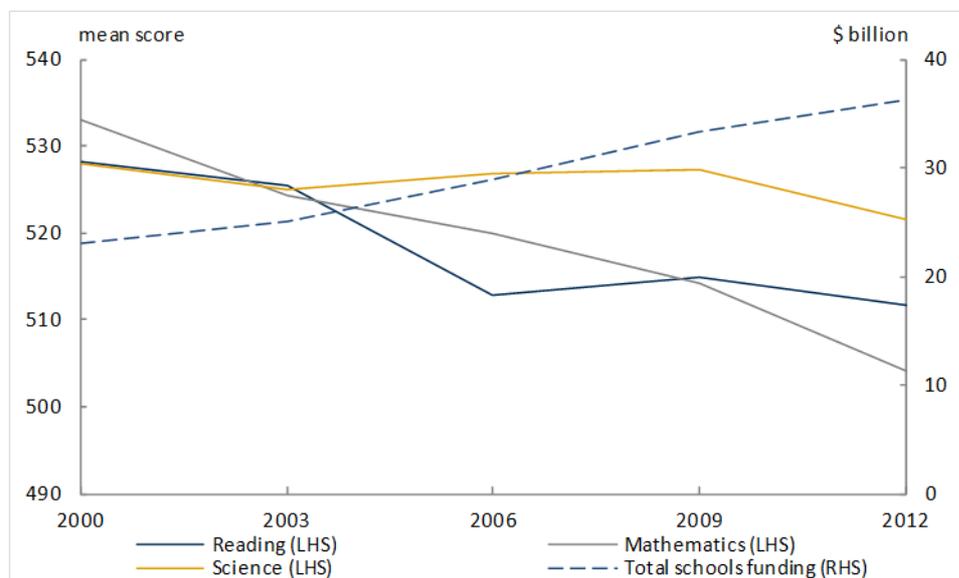


Figure 1. Australian scores on Programme for International Student Assessment and schools funding 2000 to 2012.¹⁰

⁹ Australian Government. (2017). ‘Shifting the Dial. 5 Year Productivity Review. Supporting Paper No 8 Upskilling and Retraining’. Canberra. Australian Government (p 33).

¹⁰ Australian Government. (2014a). ‘Appendix to the Report of the National Commission of Audit, Volume 1’. Canberra. Australian Government (p 265).

Australian students' academic performance, as measured by international mathematics, science and literacy tests and Australia's NAPLAN, has either deteriorated or failed to show any substantial improvement. In the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Year 4 students ranked 18th in mathematics and by 2015 had fallen to 28th place. In the 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reading test, Australian students scored 528 points; by 2015 the figure had fallen to 503. Both the deterioration in the TIMSS and PISA tests are considered statistically significant.

In relation to literacy, as measured by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the situation is equally worrying given Australian students' ranking of 21st place in the most recent 2016 test. The overall impression given by NAPLAN results is also far from satisfactory, with the Reform of the Federation White Paper observing that between 2008 and 2014 'there was minimal improvement in the proportion of students achieving at or above the minimum standards.'¹¹

Complaints by industry and business organisations also underscore public concerns about literacy, numeracy and science standards. The CEO of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, James Pearson, asserted that 'every parent should be deeply concerned that nearly a third of 15-year-olds in Australia fail to meet international baseline standards for reading, mathematics and science.'¹²

In a 2018 pre-budget submission to the Victorian Government, the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry also expressed concerns about standards when it argues the government must 'address growing community and industry concern about the overall poor performance of the education system, saying outcomes of language, literacy and numeracy assessment and reporting clearly indicate action needs to be taken.'¹³

Australia's poor performance in these areas is not restricted to students. The consequences for the wider community are identified in OECD research which concludes that 'An estimated three million adult Australians are living with the consequences of low basic skills.'¹⁴

Submissions to the 2014 Review of the Australian Curriculum expressed concerns about the academic rigor and soundness of the national curriculum and its ability to support what the Melbourne Declaration describes as 'the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians.'¹⁵

While mastery of the basics – particularly literacy and numeracy – is key to every student's success, of equal value is introducing students to what Victoria's 1985 Blackburn report

¹¹ Australian Government. (2014b). 'Reform of the Federation White Paper: Roles and responsibilities in education. Part A: Early Childhood and Schools. Issues Paper 4'. December 2014. Canberra. Australian Government (p 27).

¹² ACCI Media Release. (23rd June, 2017). 'School funding settled, we now need to focus on standards'. Retrieved 26 September, 2018 from <https://www.australianchamber.com.au/news/school-funding-settled-we-now-need-to-focus-on-standards/>

¹³ VCCI. (2018). 'Education, training and skills must be a key budget priority'. Retrieved 26 September from <https://www.victorianchamber.com.au/policy-and-advocacy/news/media-releases/2013/04/22/education-training-and-skills-must-be-key-budget->

¹⁴ OECD. (2017). 'Building Skills for All in Australia'. Paris. OECD.

¹⁵ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2008). 'Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians' (p 4). MCEETYA.

refers to as ‘our best validated knowledge and artistic achievements.’ Such an approach to schooling ensures that young learners are exposed to the grand narrative of Western civilization, particularly in relation to the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. A world-class, nation-building curriculum recognizes that cultural literacy is essential for personal growth and for enabling future citizens to be well informed, thoughtful and productive members of the broader community.

The 2014 national curriculum review recommended that:

*ACARA revise the Australian curriculum to place more emphasis on morals, values and spirituality as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration, and to better recognize the contribution of Western civilization, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the role of economic development and industry and the democratic underpinning of the British system of government to Australia’s development.*¹⁶

The review also suggested that the national curriculum was overcrowded; that there was too much focus on the three cross-curriculum priorities (indigenous, Asia and sustainability); that the mandated general capabilities were not justified and that the approach to pedagogy was not properly substantiated by being based on sound research.

One example relates to the early years of reading where the prevailing approach draws heavily on a ‘whole language’ model that eschews the more formal, evidenced-based phonics and phonemic awareness approach. Another example involves adopting innovations such as student-centered, inquiry-based learning, where teachers become facilitators and guides by the side, instead of students benefiting from explicit teaching and ensuring all students gain a substantial and rigorous grounding in essential knowledge, understanding and skills associated with key subjects.

Having two levels of government involved in school education, especially since the commonwealth has taken a more active role, represents another area of concern. Such has been the increase in centralised control, especially under the Rudd/Gillard Governments, that Melbourne-based academic Brian Caldwell believes ‘Australia may end up with one of the most centralised and bureaucratically organised systems in the world.’¹⁷ In his report detailing the results of a national survey involving school principals, Caldwell concludes that ‘regulatory compliance was a concern’ as was the ‘complexity arising from answering to two levels of government.’¹⁸

How to achieve efficiencies and greater accountability? Can Australians have confidence in their state and territory authorities, especially when there is so much evidence of under-educated school leavers and underperformance in national and international assessments? What incentives are there for greater national collaboration and innovation?

¹⁶ Australian Government. (2014c). Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report. Canberra. Australian Government.

¹⁷ Caldwell. B. (2009). ‘The need for autonomy, accountability and choice’. *Australian Financial Review*. Retrieved 9 October, 2018 from <http://educationaltransformations.com.au/wp-content/uploads/A+need+for+autonomy.pdf>

¹⁸ Caldwell. B. (2007). ‘Principal Autonomy Research Project. Educational Transformations’. Victoria (pp 6/7).

There are also concerns about the mission, functionality, integration and accountability of the various entities that make up the national school education infrastructure.

The Reform of Federation White paper previously referred to suggests that the duplication, additional cost and increased bureaucratic load placed on teachers and schools has led to ‘a system that is less efficient, effective and equitable than it could be in terms of delivering outcomes for all Australians.’¹⁹ The various options canvassed in the White Paper deserve consideration as it is clear that high-performing education systems and schools are frequently characterized by less centralised control and greater autonomy and decision-making at the local level (see part two of this policy paper). Ideally, any national education infrastructure will reduce overlap and bring financial efficiencies while providing incentives for collaboration across jurisdictions.

Evidence from the inquiry led by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) shows that the quality of teacher education is another policy area of concern. While much is made in the media about students with unacceptably low ATARs entering teacher education courses, even more worrying is the high attrition rate among early career teachers and the fact that so many beginning teachers do not see teaching as a long term career.

2. International Context

Cross-national comparisons are becoming increasingly common as politicians, policy-makers and many other groups weigh the challenges of educating young people in the 21st century. In education, the greatest pressure for improvements and change now tends to come from the publication of results in international student assessments, particularly in mathematics, science and literacy. The rankings inevitably encourage comparisons with countries regarded as ‘successful’ and ‘high-performing’.²⁰

While education in Australia is the preserve of states and territories, albeit increasingly influenced by the commonwealth government, international developments also influence what happens across the nation.

Tests such as TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS rank the performance of students from over 60 countries in mathematics, science and literacy. Student achievement has a significant impact on public perceptions of academic standards as well as government policy because the test results inform league tables that are then used to rank education systems. While such results provide only one indicator of academic success, their importance lies in the fact that literacy and numeracy, in particular, constitute key foundations for further learning.

Associated with the publication of league tables is research directed at identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems such as Shanghai, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Finland. There is considerable interest in the reasons why some nations have managed to improve performance over time while others have either slipped backwards or flatlined. It is unrealistic to assume that particular characteristics are instantly transferable from one education system to another – one example being the Confucian ethic prevalent in Asian countries that encourages students to respect teachers and appreciate

¹⁹ Australian Government. 2014b. Op. Cit.

²⁰ ACARA. (2017). ‘Literature review: contemporary approaches to comparative education research’. Sydney. ACARA. Retrieved 9 October from <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/media/3576/literature-review.pdf>

meritocracy and the benefits of academic studies – but comparative research does make it possible to identify strategies worthy of further investigation.²¹

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has undertaken and commissioned studies investigating why some education systems outperform others and what might be done to strengthen educational outcomes.²² The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) also regularly analyses Australia's performance in international tests and provides recommendations for future policy.²³ Business organisations such as McKinsey & Company are also involved in an attempt to identify and evaluate what constitutes 'best practice' as measured by international test results.²⁴

A number of benchmarking projects have also been undertaken in Australia comparing local intended curricula frameworks and syllabuses against overseas examples.²⁵ International researchers including Ludger Woessmann and Eric A. Hanushek have also written extensively about the consistently strong performance of some education systems.²⁶ Australian researchers Gary Marks and Mark Harrison have analysed international test results as well as NAPLAN and Year 12 examinations to determine what influences educational outcomes.

Schools and education systems do not operate in isolation, and societies like Australia must evolve and innovate within a rapidly evolving and complex global environment.

Technological change, the impact of increased population and rates of migration, concerns about the environment and Samuel P. Huntington's 'clash of cultures'²⁷ are all contributing to an increasingly uncertain and fractious world.

One response to this change and uncertainty is to adopt a future-focused perspective in which competencies and skills are identified as necessary for preparing students for a volatile global environment. Indeed, this is part of the rationale for the national curriculum's inclusion of competencies such as critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability and information and communication technology capability; it is impossible to know what the future holds.

²¹ ACARA. (2017-2018) Program of Research. <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources-and-publications/publications/program-of-research-2017-2020/>

²² See OECD. (2016). 'PISA Low-Performing Students Why They Fall Behind And How To Help Them Succeed'. Paris. OECD.

²³ ACER. (2017). 'Lifting achievement levels and improving the return on Australia's investment in schooling'. Camberwell. ACER.

²⁴ McKinsey & Company. (2007). 'How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top'.

McKinsey & Company. Retrieved 9 October from

https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/industries/social%20sector/our%20insights/how%20the%20worlds%20best%20performing%20school%20systems%20come%20out%20on%20top/how_the_world_s_best-performing_school_systems_come_out_on_top.ashx

²⁵ See Donnelly. K. (2005). *Benchmarking the primary school curricula*. Canberra. Department of Education, Science and Training and a number of international comparative studies carried out by ACARA - Retrieved 9 October, 2018 from <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources-and-publications/publications/program-of-research-2017-2020/>

²⁶ See Woessmann. L. (2007). *International Evidence on School Competition, Autonomy and Accountability: A Review*. Woessmann. L. (2016). *The Importance of School Systems: Evidence from International Differences in Student Achievement*. Hanushek E.A. and Woessmann. L. (2017). *School Resources and Student Achievement: A Review of Cross-Country Economic Research*.

²⁷ Huntington. S.P. (1993). *The Clash of Civilizations*, published in *The Clash of Civilizations The Debate: 20th Anniversary Edition*, Foreign Affairs. USA. Council on Foreign Relations.

The OECD's Education 2030 project exemplifies this futurist approach to curriculum and education. The future poses 'unprecedented challenges – social, economic and environmental' – driven by 'accelerating globalisation and a faster rate of technological developments.' This is a future characterised by 'a new explosion of scientific knowledge and a growing array of complex societal problems.'

Accordingly, the OECD argues that classrooms across the world should embrace 'a new ecosystem of learning', where the school 'curricula should continue to evolve, perhaps in radical ways.'²⁸ Central to this approach is less emphasis on those subjects that deal with essential knowledge, understanding and skills and a stronger focus on competencies.

These 21st century competencies include using tools, language, symbols and text; applying knowledge and information; interacting with and relating well to others; cooperating and managing and resolving conflicts; acting autonomously as well as within the big picture; conducting life plans and personal projects and demonstrating the ability to assert rights, interests, limits and needs.

Significantly, the CEO of ACARA has stated that 'ACARA is leading Australia's participation in the OECD Education 2030 Project. It's exploring the best ways to structure and design a curriculum that fosters competencies essential for life and work in 2030.'²⁹

2.1 Challenges and concerns

One response to Australia's underperformance in international tests is to argue for increased funding. As noted, however, while the level of investment is important, it is not the only factor influencing students' performance in international assessments. For instance, the OECD argues that 'PISA has consistently found that the amount of resources spent on education – including financial, human and material resources – is only weakly related to student performance.'³⁰

Researchers Ludger Woessman and Eric A. Hanushek reach a similar conclusion when they suggest that 'the international evidence provides little confidence that quantitative measures of expenditure and class size are the major driver of student achievement across and within countries.'³¹

While a student's home background or socioeconomic status, as measured by parental income, qualifications and occupation, is an important factor influencing academic performance in international tests as well as NAPLAN and Year 12 results, it is by no means the sole factor. An OECD report concludes that 'the link between socio-economic status and student achievement is neither absolute nor automatic, and should not be overstated.'³² In the context of the variation in PISA scores the OECD report puts the contribution at approximately 15%.

²⁸ OECD. (2018). *The Future Of Education And Skills Education 2030*. Paris. OECD.

²⁹ Rob Randall. (2018). Quoted in Ryan. M. (2018). Schools develop the general capabilities or entrench disadvantage: ACARA. EdHQ. Retrieved 9 October from <https://au.educationhq.com/news/51082/schools-develop-the-general-capabilities-or-entrench-disadvantage-acara/>

³⁰ OECD. (2014). *PISA IN Focus 44*. 'How is equity in resource allocation related to student performance?'. Paris. OECD.

³¹ Hanushek. E.A and Woessmann. L. (2017.) Op. Cit.

³² OECD. 2016. Op.Cit (p 63).

Other influential factors include a student's ability and motivation, parental involvement and expectations, school and classroom culture, motivated and well-resourced teachers who are well versed in their subject area, an education system characterised by choice and diversity and a proper balance between centralised control, oversight and subsidiarity.

To suggest that SES is not the only factor influencing educational outcomes is not to ignore the impact of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous students, those from a non-English speaking background, students with a disability and those living in rural, remote and regional Australia. Research suggests students are especially at risk if they are from dysfunctional homes and live in communities characterised by high rates of crime and substance abuse. There may well be lessons to be learned from other countries and systems where similar challenges are addressed through the curriculum, approaches to teaching and learning and school organisation and management. Charter schools in America, for example, where there is greater local autonomy and freedom to innovate, have been especially beneficial in disadvantaged urban communities where students have a record of underperformance. Other research points to the benefits of single-sex schooling for boys who are underachievers and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.³³

As important as the level of investment is how the money is spent. There is no universal panacea as education systems across the OECD are unique, but the research indicates that it is possible to identify factors that are worthwhile pursuing and that offer the chance for improvement.³⁴ Chief among these are:

- Having a rigorous, challenging and engaging curriculum that incorporates the knowledge, understanding and skills associated with the established subject domains. Instead of being 'a mile wide and an inch deep' the curriculum should promote depth and mastery of what is essential.
- Giving teachers clear, well defined, explicit and teacher friendly intended curricula syllabuses and frameworks.
- Promoting a school culture that fosters a disciplined classroom environment with high expectations and what in America is known as a 'no excuses' philosophy.³⁵
- Ensuring that teacher education and classroom pedagogy are based on sound research about what is the most effective way to teach and to structure the classroom.
- Providing schools with the autonomy, within a broad accountability regime, that enables them to best reflect and respond to the unique demands and challenges of their students and their communities.

³³ See National Association for Single-Sex Public Education (2018) <https://www.singlesexschools.org/research-forboys.htm>

³⁴ See NSW's Centre for Education Statistics & Evaluation. 'What works best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance' for recommendations about what constitutes effective pedagogy. Retrieved October 2, 2018 from <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/what-works-best-evidence-based-practices-to-help-improve-nsw-student-performance> Also the 'Australian Teaching and Learning Toolkit'. 2015. Retrieved 2 October, 2018 from <http://evidenceforlearning.org.au/the-toolkit/>

³⁵ For a description of the impact of 'no excuses' schools see <https://www.the74million.org/article/new-analysis-no-excuses-charter-schools-produce-huge-gains-for-kids-and-could-close-the-achievement-gap/>

- Having an education system that embraces choice and diversity instead of a one size-fits-all approach that treats all students as having the same ability, interests and post-school destinations.

While there is no doubt that education should be focused on the future and taking a global perspective is worthwhile, there are many caveats. It is worth remembering the metaphor attributed to physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton that ‘If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.’ This succinct statement acknowledged that what he was able to achieve drew on and required the work of those who had gone before. Continuity is as important as change, especially in relation to the established domains of knowledge that have existed for centuries and which, while evolving and changing, have stood the test of time.

In a further reference to scientific achievement, the Australian academic Tony Gibbons contends that ‘Einstein cannot be understood except in the context of Newton. Copernicus cannot be understood without Ptolemy. Science is not a series of isolated events ... it is a continuous narrative which is not a linear progression.’³⁶

As suggested by the Australian-based sinologist Pierre Ryckmans, it is also important that students have a thorough grounding in their culture before they can begin to understand and appreciate others.³⁷ While societies like Australia are increasingly multicultural and, thanks to digital technology, students are now living within a global village, it is essential for education to provide a strong sense of local identity and a clear sense of what makes each culture unique. According to philosopher Roger Scruton, as important as a global perspective on particular issues is the human need to identify and belong to what is familiar, local and easily recognizable.³⁸

Australia is a Western, liberal democracy that is quite distinctive in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia’s legal and political institutions, economic and financial systems, religious traditions, cultural heritage, way of life and approach to education largely draw on and are indebted to the grand narrative associated with Western civilisation, our Judeo-Christian heritage and significant events like the Renaissance, Reformation and the Enlightenment. Western civilisation, beginning with the industrial revolution and continuing through the development of Silicon Valley and the advent of the digital age, is also responsible for extraordinary scientific and technological innovations and discoveries. The critical importance of such an education was recently seen in a Centre for Independent Studies survey of millennials that revealed uncertainty about why democracy might be preferable to socialism as a political philosophy and form of government.³⁹

It is the duty of the State to educate, and the right of the people to demand education.

The Hon. Edmund Barton
Prime Minister of Australia (1901-1903)

³⁶ Gibbons. T. (2004). *On Reflection*. Research Collection Number 11. Adelaide. Flinders University Institute of International Education.

³⁷ See Ryckmans. P. (1996). *The View from the Bridge: Aspects of Culture*. ABC. The 1996 Boyer Lectures.

³⁸ See Scruton. R. (2017). *Where We Are: The State of Britain Now*. London. Bloomsbury (pp 83-111)

³⁹ Centre for Independent Studies. (2018). *Millennials and Socialism: Australian Youth are Lurching to the Left*. Sydney. CIS.

3. Commonsense policies for school education in Australia

Young Australians carry the hope and responsibility for the nation's future.

Their education – from early learning through the primary years and into secondary school – and their post-school opportunities are central to their development as thoughtful, productive and healthy citizens who can contribute to the common good.

All young Australians deserve equitable access to high-quality school education.

All Australians deserve to have confidence in the design, delivery and outcomes of school education.

There is broad acknowledgement of the significant challenges that confront policymakers and educators as they strive to give every young Australian access to a high-quality education that will prepare them for life and work after they leave school.

Some of the greatest challenges are the vast distances between Australia's cities and towns, the small and dispersed population, the historic differences in schooling across the country, the number and range of individuals and organisations influencing decision-making, the lack of understanding among everyday Australians about how education systems work, and competing views about the philosophical and practical aims of schooling in the 21st century.

Key ingredients of effective school education are competent and motivated teachers and school leaders, a high-quality curriculum that sets clear standards and is closely aligned to appropriate assessment and reporting strategies, accountable and consultative education authorities and school systems, and a shared national vision for young Australians.

The policies in this document chart a way forward. They identify issues in need of urgent attention and propose commonsense solutions in the following areas:

- National goals
- School funding
- Curriculum and assessment
- Student progress
- Student qualifications
- Collaboration and accountability

3.1 Principles

The following principles underpin all policies in this document:

1. Decision-making in school education is based on fairness, objectivity, transparency, accountability and balancing centralised control and management with subsidiarity.
2. The provision of high-quality schooling for all students is the educational priority of state, territory and federal governments and their representatives.
3. Increased collaboration across jurisdictions and sectors brings improvements and efficiencies.
4. The curriculum and all associated pedagogy, assessment and reporting support students' mastery of the English language, development of numeracy skills,

understanding of Australia's unique national historic and cultural heritage, the debt owed to Western civilisation and appreciation of the obligations and opportunities of Australian citizenship.

5. Parental choice and equitable funding for all students, regardless of school sector, are essential elements of a fair system.

3.2 Policy areas requiring urgent attention

The first two sections of this policy paper provide considerable evidence indicating that numerous aspects of school education require urgent attention.

It is important to ask whether the policies themselves, the implementation of the policies, or both of these factors have led to declining educational outcomes for many young Australians. This can only be determined through rigorous inquiry and an honest audit of current practice.

Recent reports such as the 2014 Review of the Australian Curriculum, the 2018 Review to Achieve Excellence in Australian Schools and the 2018 Independent Review into Rural, Regional and Remote Education all provide evidence of shortcomings in education policy and practice.

Also in 2014, the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group reported on the training of Australian teachers. Offering over 30 recommendations intended to support 'genuine national reform', the report concluded that 'the standard across all initial teacher education programs must be lifted' in order 'to give Australian parents, students and the community confidence in those delivering school education.'⁴⁰

Most importantly, there has been little progress in achieving the national Educational Goals identified in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration. Of these, the greatest failure arguably lies in the equitable provision of high-quality education to all young Australians, regardless of where they live or the background from which they come.

The following policy areas require urgent attention in order to achieve improvements in Australian school education.

National goals for school education

The Melbourne Declaration, signed by all Education Ministers a decade ago, sets the broad Educational Goals for all Australian students. This document urgently requires renewal or replacement to ensure a strong, shared commitment by all governments and a sound understanding by the Australian people.

National goals for school education must be clearly defined and the means by which they are to be achieved must be understood and agreed. These goals – both philosophical and practical – should be reflected in curriculum and assessment materials, school funding arrangements, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and strategies for national collaboration and accountability.

⁴⁰ Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG). (2014). *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (p xi)

School funding

The current school funding model must be replaced by one that is seen to be equitable and transparent. A new model will ensure accountability in relation to the allocation of taxpayer dollars and reinforce the importance of parental choice and the provision of a robust, diverse and effective system of education.

Curriculum and assessment

Australians from all walks of life express concerns about ‘what’ and ‘how’ young people are learning and the ways in which their educational progress is measured, supported and reported.

How can the national curriculum and its associated assessment programs address the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young learners?

Can school leavers read, write and count with confidence? Do they know about the history and foundations of modern Australia and do they understand the debt owed to Western civilisation? Are they ready for the expectations of life and work after school? How do their knowledge and skills compare with those of their peers around the world? Do students leave school with a strong moral compass and the ability to decide right from wrong and how best to contribute to the common good and Australia’s development as a nation within a global context?

Changes to curriculum and assessment are being closely watched in Australia and around the world as education policymakers try to anticipate the knowledge and skills needed for life and work in the 21st century. Can Australian students be guaranteed of a thoughtful balance between the adoption of 21st century approaches – including futurist, globalist worldviews – and the retention of a clear emphasis on national priorities for schooling?

The Australian Curriculum, completed in 2016, accompanied by the national assessment program (NAP) and national reporting mechanisms (My School) sets the expectations of learning for all students. To be really effective, these instruments must apply to students in Kindergarten to Year 12, with a clear set of standards identified at the highest level of schooling that can lead the way for younger learners and guide teaching and learning practices to meet the needs of all students across the country.

The current emphasis on standardised testing of literacy and numeracy is not delivering improvements in student learning, nor is the sample testing of Civics and Citizenship, Information and Communication Technology and other curriculum areas bringing tangible benefits to overall performance and the achievement of national goals.

A consistent approach to assessment and reporting will be reassuring for students, parents, communities and other stakeholders.

Student progress

No single role currently exists as a central point of reference for all national education infrastructure or one that can act as an independent monitor of student progress. There is no

single clearinghouse for data and research, both national and international that could inform developments in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

The relatively small size of Australia's student population and teacher workforce means that efficiencies can be delivered by the creation of one national organisation that carries responsibility for the direction of school education. Each jurisdiction would continue to manage the registration of schools, employment of teachers and the publication and distribution of students' credentials. This arrangement would ensure close linkages between curriculum, assessment and professional development, eliminating the duplication of activity and uncertainty about governance that currently exist.

In line with similar roles and organisations, a new role would enable the collection of relevant data, monitoring of student progress and ensuring accountability in school education.

Student qualifications

A consistent approach to the standards and qualifications achieved by Australian students will reassure students, parents, communities and other stakeholders.

A single national credential for school leavers will enhance collaboration and accountability, ensure high academic standards and give students and parents and carers confidence in the quality and equity of school education.

Collaboration and accountability

Australia's great physical size, small population and limited taxpayer base make the efficient and effective use of human and financial resources a priority. As argued by the Reform of the Federation Discussion Paper (2015), and building on the spirit of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) now is the time to rethink the incentives for collaboration and cooperation across jurisdictions and sectors.

An invaluable benefit of better collaboration between all levels of government and all education authorities is the capacity of many minds to deliver innovations and solutions. Working together for a common cause – improvements in educational outcomes – means a real commitment to the principle of a 'fair go' and is an example worth setting for young Australians.

A mechanism is urgently needed to bring the various entities comprising the national education infrastructure together (e.g. ACARA, AITSL, ESA) to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. This strategy would mean close liaison with education authorities, enabling the collection of data and the sharing of ideas relevant to school education. A key aspect of this work would be the transparent and timely publication of evidence of collaboration and progress in policy areas that require urgent attention.

4 Policy proposals

Commonsense policies in education are needed to ensure that students, parents, communities, employers and all other stakeholders understand the opportunities and expectations that characterise the schooling of young Australians. All Australians should have confidence in

the development and implementation of policies relating to school education across the nation.

The following policies for school education emphasise strategies that would enhance equitable access to a balanced, enriching and rigorous education for all Australian students.

4.1 National Goals for School Education

- a. Revisit the goals and priorities of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) to ensure emphasis on equity, improvements in the design and delivery of high-quality education, and promotion of the nation-building, future-focused role of schooling.
- b. Ensure that the unique historic, geographic and cultural heritage of Australia resonates throughout all documentation and strategies relevant to school education.
- c. Consider the nation-building principles that characterize the curriculum and other documentation of high-performing systems such as Singapore and Finland.

4.2 School funding

- a. Allocate per capita funding according to formulae appropriate for primary and secondary school students
- b. Ensure that funding follows the student, maximising choice and encouraging schools to diversify their offerings and respond innovatively to local need
- c. Design a simple mechanism for schools and communities to obtain ‘top-up’ funding on an equitable needs basis
- d. Audit school and system assets to ensure accountability; provide independent accounting support for school clusters or systems and report on the findings annually to enable some support for local and national planning, including forward estimates.

4.3 Curriculum and assessment

- a. Redesign the curriculum as an F-12 continuum using a consistent structure and
 - i. emphasising succinctness, continuity and coherence
 - ii. setting high standards for school leavers that will guide teaching and learning in earlier years
 - iii. reducing overall volume by adopting a core/elective approach
 - iv. embedding agreed competencies / skills across all learning areas
 - v. including, where relevant, explicit and implicit references to indigenous knowledge, perspectives and worldviews
 - vi. providing clear guidance and examples for teachers and learning support entities
 - vii. maximising flexibility of delivery while identifying key learning and assessment requirements
 - viii. demonstrating clear alignment between academic expectations, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment and reporting
 - ix. providing clear, concise descriptions of academic expectations that can be adapted for use in reporting documents
- b. Establish a mandatory core of five subjects (English, Mathematics, Science, History, Language), each requiring the development and demonstration of sophisticated knowledge and skills that are transferable across the curriculum and into post-school life and work
- c. Embed a cross-curricular focus on students’ development of:
 - i. reading and writing skills in the English language

- ii. research, analysis and critical thinking skills
- iii. presentation and debating skills
- iv. collaboration and problem-solving skills
- v. digital technology skills
- vi. numeracy skills
- d. Enhance access to vocational subjects and practical skills (adjunct, not replacement), and invest in more places for work-based student practicums
- e. Develop short courses (especially for upper primary and secondary school students) that enhance subject areas, identify relevant 21st century competencies, complement student interests, reflect local needs and could lead to senior secondary and post-school vocational qualifications (e.g. problem-solving on environmental issues; historical investigation within communities).
- f. Replace the current literacy and numeracy testing regime with a national assessment program that is directly aligned to the curriculum (five core subject areas of the curriculum), designed locally, enables benchmarking within and across schools, and is voluntary. The assessments will apply to students in Years 3, 6 and 9. Over time, the incentive for schools will be clear: transparency, commitment to student achievement and teachers' professional development, and demonstrable improvements.

4.4 Student progress

- a. Establish a National School Education Commission to set expectations of national collaboration and accountability and monitor and report on national progress in these and other areas.
- b. Establish the role of National School Education Commissioner to oversee implementation of the National Goals for Education. This role will:
 - i. Drive national collaboration on Australian Curriculum, assessment, teacher professional development, research and data collection
 - ii. Monitor progress towards national goals, including through a national audit of resources and expenditure relating to school education
 - iii. Be supported by an Assistant Commissioner for rural, regional and remote (per IRRRE recommendation)

4.5 Student qualifications

- a. Ensure a contemporary mix of credentials that meets the needs of students (academic, vocational, etc.) and supports a streamlined F-12 continuum leading to national qualifications
- b. Introduce two new national qualifications to reflect the high standards agreed by all education authorities and which reflect the F-12 continuum of learning, as follows:

4.5.1 Australian Primary School Certificate (APSC)

- i. Create a template designed to show development over four years (3-6); this will follow the student across all schools and jurisdictions
- ii. Report on annual and average attendance as well as results in core subjects
- iii. English, Mathematics, Science, History (including civics and citizenship), Additional Language
- iv. Include a project that reflects individual interests, knowledge and skills beyond the classroom (Year 6)
- v. Include a portfolio of participation in other activities (arts, sport, community service)

- vi. Provide incentive for students to achieve personalised and meaningful goals beyond the standard (and very variable) report card
- vii. Stimulate school engagement and serve as incentive for regular attendance
- viii. Strengthen teachers' sense of purpose and awareness of student agency, supporting better primary-secondary transition

4.5.1 Australian Senior Secondary School Certificate (ASSSC)

- i. Ensure continuity and coherence through a focus on core subjects (English, Mathematics, Science, History (including civics and citizenship), Additional Language
- ii. Base the credential on a matriculation examination that is not related solely to university entrance (see Finland), with each core subject area to be given an individual grade
- iii. Enable additional subjects to be assessed and reported by jurisdictions (local context and flexibility relevant to post-school activity and/or tertiary entry – emphasis on student interests and potential careers)
- iv. Provide scope for addressing other skills and attributes relevant to employers, tertiary institutions and other stakeholders

4.6 Collaboration and accountability

- a. Undertake biennial national information audits to determine the nature and scope of human, financial and other resources dedicated to school education, with the overarching purpose of identifying opportunities for better national collaboration and greater accountability and effectiveness.
- b. Provide incentive to education authorities across all sectors to contribute their data, perhaps by subsidizing the secondment of independent officers with expertise in financial reporting and other relevant areas
- c. Publish detailed reports and monitor changes in the findings of biennial audits

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