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Teach teachers so students can learn

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*Until we concentrate on enhancing the quality of our educators, there will be no significant improvement in our system, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

All Australians want to improve the quality of school education. This ensures our children and the next generation have successful lives. And there are growing concerns about how to prepare the economy for the end of the mining boom. Where will our new sources of economic growth come from? What will boost productivity and well-being?

The Grattan Institute report *Investing in Our Teachers, Investing in Our Economy*, shows investing in teacher effectiveness is not only the most valuable reform for improving school education but is the best investment available to governments to increase productivity and long-run economic growth.

A 10 per cent increase in teacher effectiveness would lift Australia's students to among the best performing in the world and add \$90 billion to the Australian economy by 2050. Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Bank shows that the long-run impact on economic growth will be greater as today's higher-performing students become tomorrow's productive workers. The economic benefits will come at the time that many experts predict the mining boom will abate.

Improving teacher effectiveness also has substantial benefits for individuals. Young people who stay in school and invest in further education can expect to earn an extra 8 per cent to 10 per cent a year for each additional year of education they undertake.

There are five general methods to increase teacher effectiveness. First, improve the quality of applicants to the profession. Second, improve teachers' initial education. Third, engage teachers in meaningful development throughout their careers. Fourth, recognise effective teachers and expand their practices in schools. And fifth, address underperformance.

A critical step is to measure an individual teacher's effectiveness. A variety of measures, both qualitative and quantitative, should be used to measure teacher effectiveness. Student test scores are not the measure of a teacher's effectiveness. They are an important part of the picture but meaningful teacher evaluation should also include student feedback, teamwork and peer evaluation, classroom observation from senior teachers and the school principal, self-evaluation, teacher development and improvement and a variety of other factors that measure teachers' contributions to schools.

Many believe that governments or administrative departments should measure teacher effectiveness. But school principals and teachers are in the best position to evaluate teachers. We need to empower them and place our trust in them.

Centralised control lends itself to centralised measures such as standardised tests and centrally administered teacher standards that are normally linked to rigid career structures.

An excessive focus on standardised test scores provides an incomplete and often inaccurate measure of teacher effectiveness. And teachers and principals tell us that our focus on teacher standards has created an overly bureaucratic process that does not identify or recognise effective teaching, nor improve teaching practices. Nearly two-thirds of Australian teachers report that teacher evaluation is largely done to fulfil administrative requirements and has little impact on the way they teach in the classroom.

Past investments in school education have focused on paying more teachers to teach smaller classes. These policies have been politically popular and are intuitively appealing.

But reducing class size is not the answer. Expenditure on school education increased by 41 per cent in the decade up to 2006 but this had no impact on student performance, with international assessments showing performance stagnated in mathematics and significantly declined in reading.

The evidence has consistently shown that reducing class size is expensive but fails to improve learning. A recent example from Florida shows that reductions of about 2½-3 students a class cost on average more than \$1 million a school each year. These reductions had a negligible impact on student learning, absenteeism and social factors such as school bullying and crime.

Money should be spent where it will have the greatest impact on students. The overwhelming evidence shows that investing in teacher effectiveness has the greatest impact on student learning. Students with highly effective teachers can, in a single year, learn twice as much as students with poor teachers.

This does not mean teachers are to blame for failing students. On the contrary, the Grattan Institute report argues that investing in improving teacher effectiveness should be the first objective of policy makers.

Reform that focuses on improving teacher effectiveness can lift our students to among the highest performing in the world. They are the most potent reforms available to governments to increase Australia's gross domestic product.

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