

Feds could save education by staying out of it

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*Only the states have any hope of driving improvements in Australia's schools, writes **Ben Jensen***

In 2011 the Gillard government announced it would pay high-performing teachers a bonus. From next year, the scheme will pay up to 8000 teachers one-off bonuses of \$7500 or \$10,000.

It sounds like a good idea to reward teachers who perform well but are often paid poorly. It isn't. The policy is one of a host of federal government interventions in school education that are not only ineffective, they are doing damage to much-needed reform.

In Australia, the states and the non-government systems run schools. The commonwealth's scheme therefore pays a bonus to state government employees. This breaks a fundamental rule of good governance and management: it gives employees two bosses. Should teachers follow the instructions of their state employer, or should they try to work in a way that nets them a federal payout?

The program is confusing for schools and teachers. It was no surprise that when teachers protested against the federal bonus scheme most blamed their state employers, not the federal government.

The program is a small example of a huge and worsening problem in Australian education. The latest international results show that our primary school students are the lowest performing of any English speaking nation, just above the world's lowest-performing developed nations. There is a rising sense that Australian schools are struggling and that the policies and extra spending we have tried in response are not working. Amid this urgent need for change, the federal government's role in school education is often counterproductive. It is time for Canberra to step back.

How can this be? The federal government is hardly to blame for the weaknesses of state education systems. The states run schools and they bear most responsibility for the faults. Given the evidence of declining performance, shouldn't the commonwealth intervene more, not less, in schools?

The problem is that the commonwealth has no levers to directly improve schools. It doesn't hire, pay, develop or fire teachers or principals. It doesn't own or maintain school buildings, establish governance and management arrangements or set exams. The states do all this and more.

But the commonwealth wants to get involved, because of the importance of school education to the economy and the nation. Both sides of federal politics have intervened because they believe the states are not running schools effectively. Of course, federal politicians also like getting involved. They enjoy the many ribbon-cutting ceremonies on offer. A unique feature of Australian schools is the signs announcing that the federal government paid for this or that building or classroom. Even though the commonwealth's influence on schools is minimal, school education will play a prominent role in this year's federal election.

It is now difficult to find a single area of school policy that the federal government is not pushing into. It intervenes in teacher standards, evaluation and performance management, teacher pay and professional development even though it is the states that employ teachers. It intervenes in school evaluation, autonomy and governance, school buildings and classrooms, and a host of programs aimed at specific schools even though it is the states that run schools.

The impacts of many federal policy initiatives have clearly not been thought through. For example, the commonwealth's move to increase school autonomy is a push to reduce the interference of state governments in state schools. It's more than a little odd when federal politicians argue that adding a federal intervention on top of state government policies will decrease bureaucracy and increase local decision making. And this policy has strong bipartisan support! Even more bizarre was a Howard government program giving schools money only if they had flagpoles.

Even high-quality federal programs have limited impact. There is no doubt that some have helped specific schools but they have had no wider impact because they are not part of a system-wide strategy. They can't be, because the federal government doesn't run schools.

How did we get here? The Constitution gives the states responsibility for running schools, and before the 1960s the federal government made no direct expenditure in them. In 1964, the Menzies government offered grants for science laboratories and technical training equipment. Yet recurrent funding did not begin until the 1970s, when the Karmel Report recommended the introduction of needs-based funding. Under the Howard government, non-government schools received funds according to their socioeconomic status.

But this was complicated by a number of schools having their funding guaranteed in a way that distorted the amount each school received. This system is scheduled to be replaced by the Gonski proposals.

Now, every year the federal government spends roughly \$15 billion on school education (about a third of the amount spent by Australian governments). The vast majority of federal expenditure – about \$14bn – directly funds schools, mostly in the nongovernment sector.

The commonwealth provides about 57 per cent of the recurrent income of Catholic schools and 33 per cent of independent schools. Because of the visibility of this support, the federal government tries to make highly visible interventions in the government school sector so as to negate any apparent bias towards the nongovernment sector.

The Rudd- Gillard governments have substantially expanded federal involvement, to good and bad effect.

The government has created an effective national framework that includes national testing through NAPLAN, the MySchool website and other forms of greater transparency. It has also created a national curriculum, and various bodies to develop and run these reforms. These are significant milestones.

But this government – going much further than its predecessors – has extended its reach into the running of schools. The commonwealth now spends \$2.5bn on trade training centres in schools; \$2.5bn on the Digital Education Revolution; \$1.5bn on Smarter Schools to help disadvantaged schools, improve literacy and numeracy, and improve teaching and school leadership; and \$444 million to improve teacher quality. The list of programs runs to a cost of nearly \$25bn (of which \$16bn is the Building the Education Revolution program). In 2012-13 the cost of all the extra programs will be about \$1.15bn. The consequences for the quality of our schools are profound. High-performing education systems around the world excel in three vital areas of education policy. Australia must improve in all three, but all are weakened by our federal system.

First, high-performing systems have a precise, coherent strategy to improve learning and teaching. They have clear and detailed descriptions of how they want their students to learn and their teachers to teach. No state system in Australia has taken this step. But the federal government can't do this for them. The states run schools. They must set the improvement strategy.

Second, high-performing systems align every aspect of the system towards developing these specific types of learning and teaching. If we want teachers to teach in a particular manner then their initial university education must focus on these methods, their professional development must build on them, and teacher evaluation must recognise and reward them. This cannot happen when a federal government is haphazardly hopping into different parts of school education. Programs must reinforce each other, not work in isolation or against each other.

Third, improving learning and teaching requires students and teachers to change their behaviour. Education reform succeeds or fails on how effectively it is implemented in schools and classrooms.

In high-performing systems, policy design and implementation are inexorably linked; effective implementation begins with policy design. Policy reform documents in Hong Kong read like implementation plans: they detail every step of how policy will improve learning in classrooms. Ontario achieved one of the world's highest-performing systems not because it designed new modes of teaching, but through an unrelenting focus on effective implementation that continually improved teaching in classrooms.

In Australia, implementation is poor because we separate policy design from implementation. Greater federal involvement exacerbates this separation. For example, a new national curriculum should have the goal of improving teaching. But ours won't, because it has been designed by a national body, with implementation left to the states. The divide between what we teach (the design of the curriculum) and how we teach it (implementation in schools) is built into the system. But only a strong link between design and implementation will improve student learning.

In Hong Kong, by contrast, curriculum reform was designed with an emphasis on changing teaching. It focused on changing how students learned to read and how reading was taught. Implementation programs helped teachers to deliver the new curriculum through improved teaching practices. In just five years, the approach took Hong Kong from 17th to second in world rankings of primary students' reading literacy (Australia sits in 27th position).

How can we change our system to achieve something like Hong Kong's success?

The federal government could opt out of school education altogether. Canada, a country with high-performing education systems, has no federal department of education. The Canadians believe that since the provinces run school education, the federal government has no role.

Yet such a move is very unlikely here. Our history would almost certainly rule it out. And the change would waste a number of good reforms.

A more realistic reform would be to substantially reduce the commonwealth's role. It would focus on what it does best. It would set national objectives; increase transparency through MySchool by shining a light on how each system performs: hold states and sectors accountable by publishing student outcome data; and set a minimal and broad national framework managed through existing national institutions. This reduced involvement would promote principles of effective governance and management.

What about funding, the commonwealth's most important role? Currently the commonwealth funds a lot of Catholic and independent schools and a little of state government schools. The states fund a little of independent and Catholic schools and most of state schools. This is not good practice. Canberra should pass money to the states, but the states should decide how it should be distributed between schools.

This would be a fundamental shift. All sectors would need assurances about their funding levels. But this is not the problem for the non-government sectors that it once was. The Coalition has long supported funding for nongovernment schools and the ALP now has a similar policy position. With a third of students now at non-government schools and more joining each year, for any state government to cut funding to non-government schools would be electoral suicide.

The change would keep the national curriculum framework and national assessments such as NAPLAN, but end federal interventions in the running of schools. Institutions such as the Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership would remain, but most other federal programs would be cut.

In tough budgetary times this would save more than \$1bn a year. That money could go directly to the states to further fund government and non-government schools. This would be a substantial increase that would either help to pay for the Gonski proposals or be spent on other school reforms.

Critically, states could use the money to develop the effective education reform strategies Australia requires. And not a moment too soon. Australia's performance in international studies shows we are slipping down the table with terrible consequences for our children. A new approach is needed to arrest our decline. Only the states for all their problems of funding and uneven performance can provide it. We need to recast our federal-state structures to help them achieve it.

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