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Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia

“The world’s centre of high performance in education is now East Asia and Australian educators can and must learn from its success,” Grattan Institute School Education Program Director Ben Jensen said today.

Launching Grattan’s new report, [*Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia*](#), Dr Jensen said OECD PISA tests ranked four of the top five highest-performing school systems as Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore and Shanghai.

The tests also showed western countries – including Australia – slipping behind East Asian systems in school performance, despite substantial increases in school funding across the OECD between 2000 and 2008.

“In Shanghai, the average 15-year old mathematics student is performing at a level two to three years above his or her counterpart in Australia, the USA and Europe,” Dr Jensen said.

“That has profound consequences. As economic power is shifting from West to East, high performance in education is too.”

But Dr Jensen was optimistic Australian schools and education systems could match the successes of their counterparts in East Asia.

“The rise of these four systems is not culturally determined by Confucianism, rote learning, excessive focus on exams or Tiger Mothers,” he said.

Instead, these systems focus on the things that are known to matter in the classroom: a relentless, practical focus on effective learning and the creation of a strong culture of teacher education, collaboration, mentoring, feedback and sustained professional development.

Grattan’s report shows that while Australia cannot and should not import policymaking systems from East Asian countries, it has much to learn from their unrelenting focus on learning and teaching, and readiness to make tough trade-offs to achieve their goals.

“Many countries across the world have tried to instil these practices. Most have further to go. This report shows in detail how it can be done,” Dr Jensen said.