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Five steps to fixing schools

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*Our schools need meaningful and ambitious reform, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

Peter Garrett starts his role as federal Minister for Schools, Early Childhood and Youth knowing he has large shoes to fill. Julia Gillard achieved more reforms than any education minister in decades.

But the next stage of school reform may be more difficult. Garrett needs a comprehensive reform agenda that improves student results. As a start, here are five initiatives that would greatly improve the education we offer students.

First is the reform of school funding to end the debate about how much money is spent in which sector. Instead, the focus should be on effectiveness and what works. Australia already spends more than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average in school education. Increased spending has not yielded results in the past. Between 1995 and 2006, funding in school education increased by 41 per cent, but between 2000 and 2006, student performance in international tests stagnated in mathematics and significantly declined in reading. This reflects long-term trends.

Garrett will confront a barrage of requests for more money from all sectors as the review of school funding is completed next year. These should be ignored unless they are matched by improved outcomes for students.

A change in focus requires significant reform in government programs and schools. Fortunately, the seeds of change have already been planted. Student assessments conducted under the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy, and the MySchool website were significant reforms, but their long-term impact will be greater. The focus on school performance will grow and the inclusion of school financial data on MySchool will emphasise the need to compare costs against performance.

A new era of transparency in school education should lead to meaningful evaluation of government programs so we understand better what works in schools. Few programs are properly evaluated. For instance, millions of dollars are spent on disadvantaged schools but we know little about which programs are most effective. In future, the effectiveness of all education programs and policies should be evaluated by comparing their costs and benefits. This sounds fundamental, but unfortunately it is not common practice in school education.

Second, under-performing schools in all education sectors need to be addressed. MySchool identified these schools and increased school accountability. This should be matched by increased political accountability: ministers and administrators should be held responsible for the performance of all schools; pointing the finger at schools will not be enough.

Governments need to play an active role in turning around under-performing schools. When a school is identified as such on MySchool, it should trigger a development program to ensure students receive the quality education they require. The program should first evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in such schools, and implement development programs with tangible objectives and milestones.

Programs that provide specialised teaching to students who fall behind in assessments have been effective in other countries. Such programs need to be implemented as soon as a child starts to fall

behind. Early intervention has consistently been shown to be more effective and less costly in helping low-performing students.

The third area of reform should start where teachers' careers start - Garrett should review all teaching courses in our universities. The push for reform of the education that teachers receive is growing in many countries and, while some teaching courses in Australia offer the world's best, quality varies substantially.

Past reviews have lacked evidence. Teaching should be an academically taught, clinical-practice profession. This review should compare the teaching of new graduates from each university, the performance of their students, and feedback from school principals, teachers and students.

The fourth area should improve teacher development once teachers enter schools. We still do not meaningfully evaluate the quality of teachers' work, expand effective teaching practices or address under-performance.

More than 90 per cent of teachers report that if they improved the quality of their teaching they would not receive any recognition. And more than 80 per cent report evaluation of their work has little impact on the way they teach in the classroom. These practices need to be reversed.

Teachers want meaningful evaluation that recognises quality teaching and has consequences for teachers who are more, and less, effective. This requires school principals to act on informed judgments about their teachers. Education departments should not be given the responsibility to evaluate teachers, as they rely too much on standardised test scores and bureaucratic tick-a-box exercises.

The fifth area should address the career and salary structure of teachers. The bonus schemes announced during the election are important but they do not address the underlying problem. Teaching is one of the few jobs that provides almost the same responsibilities to teachers on their first day of work as on their last. They will teach similar classes and numbers of students. In fact, new teachers are often required to teach more students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Greater support is needed for new teachers and substantially more responsibility should be given to the most effective teachers.

This will require changes to teacher salaries. Effective teachers with new responsibilities will require long-overdue salary increases. Instead, state governments have increased starting salaries, and this has created problems. On average, teachers reach their maximum salary after about seven years of teaching. There are obvious problems with a career structure where no pay increases are available after the age of 30 for teachers who entered the profession straight from university.

These are just five areas of reform in school education. It is vital that a meaningful and ambitious reform agenda is developed for our schools.

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