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## Teachers, not size of class, key to learning

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*We have the opportunity to make our schools the best in the world, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

International evidence shows that important debates in Australia about school funding are generally misinformed, and that our focus should be on teacher quality rather than class size.

Finland is generally regarded as having the best performing education system in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). But we should avoid sweeping statements and instead concentrate on important practices that can be applied in Australia.

For example, the Finnish use national testing to identify and assist students falling behind in literacy and numeracy. This could address our neglect of these students who we too often let slip farther behind as they get older.

Some 8 per cent of Australian Year 3 students perform at or below minimum levels of writing literacy.

By Year 9, nearly one-third of students have fallen to these levels.

In Finland, success is achieved even though they spend less per student than we do in Australia.

The key lesson from education systems around the world: more money is not the answer.

The highest performing systems consistently spend less than lower performing ones. The Australian experience is that substantial increases in education expenditure have not led to improvements in performance.

If we want to improve performance, we need to change the way we spend money rather than simply spending more.

Policies to reduce class size have largely driven increases in education expenditure. These are not supported by international evidence but do substantially increase costs.

The highest performing systems generally have larger classes than low performing countries.

Teacher quality is the key to improving performance. The international evidence consistently shows that teacher quality has the greatest impact on student performance. A student who spends a year with an effective teacher can learn at least double what a student learns with a less effective teacher.

To this end, Finland requires all teachers have a Masters degree before they step in front of a classroom. But we shouldn't blithely emulate Finnish practices.

Only 16 per cent of Australian teachers would be qualified to teach in our schools if we applied the Finnish rule.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn is that difficult reform can lead to substantial benefits. Korea provides just one example. Less than two generations ago, only 12 per cent of young people (aged 25-34) in Korea attained a tertiary education compared to 28 per cent in Australia.

Now, 58 per cent of Korea's youth have a tertiary education compared to only 42 per cent in Australia.

In less than two generations Australia has lost its comparative advantage and Korea has moved from one of the lowest educated OECD countries to the top of the OECD table in tertiary attainment.

We have the potential to create the best school education systems in the world if we are prepared to focus on improving teacher quality.

This isn't about pointing the finger at teachers but about developing the best teacher workforce in the world. To do so, we must learn from the evidence here and overseas.

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