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Finance data helps teachers

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*Emphasis on cost-effectiveness will lift pay for the top performers in the profession, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

For many, the debate over school finance data on My School will focus on differences in the resources available to government and non-government schools. But this is short-sighted and slides back into unproductive debates that dominated school education in this country. This debate has masked a much greater problem in school funding.

In 2009, the reading literacy of 15-year-old students was four months lower than 15-year-old students in 2000. Yet, over that period, public expenditure on education increased, in real terms, by 33 per cent, and private expenditure by 51 per cent. This pattern of increasing costs and stagnating or declining performances has unfortunately been consistent for decades.

The inclusion of school finance data on the My School website creates a new paradigm in school education in Australia. Regardless of whether a school is in the government, independent or Catholic sector, the game has changed for all schools. It will affect students, parents, schools and every education administrator and bureaucrat. It also places increased pressure on politicians.

Placing a school's finance data alongside indicators of its performance (however imprecise those indicators are) emphasises the need to compare costs and benefits in school education. This will bring substantial change in school education and provide benefits for all. In the longer term, the greatest impact will be on teachers and it will be a positive one.

A new paradigm that emphasises cost-effectiveness in education will create real change.

Change will be required when parents analyse their school's performance on My School, the fees charged (for non-government schools) and the resources it has compared to other schools. Real change will occur when the public asks why schools in some states perform better with fewer resources. Real change will occur when governments respond to increased pressure to lift performance and cut costs, by conducting cost-benefit analysis on all of their school programs and expenditure.

It is clear that we have continually failed to properly weigh costs and benefits in school education. This has prevented learning about what has and has not been successful in improving student learning in a cost-effective manner, and it highlights the fundamental shift that My School now brings.

The new paradigm will demand changes at every level of school education. For some, this will not be a significant shift as they are already ahead of the game. But many others are still operating in what is now an old paradigm.

What changes can we expect in this new paradigm? The pressure to increase performance in a cost-effective manner will see greater resources invested in teacher effectiveness. The evidence shows that this is the most effective way to increase student performance. Research shows that a student with an excellent teacher can achieve in half a year what a student with a less effective teacher achieves in a full year. The schools and the education systems that are the first to effectively focus their resources on teacher effectiveness will have a substantial advantage.

For policymakers and administrators, this new paradigm will require significant change in education systems in every state and territory. It will increase political accountability to ensure their school funding and education policies are increasing student learning, particularly in poorer communities. They will have to follow the example set by policymakers in successful education systems in other

countries, particularly our Asian neighbours. In these countries, an emphasis on weighing the costs and benefits of school reform resulted in an increased focus on teacher effectiveness. This resulted in increased teacher salaries, better education and training and eventually higher social status for the teaching profession.

Within schools, the shift will be even greater. In the old paradigm, schools have often tried to differentiate themselves in areas unrelated to performance. Some offer more subjects and smaller class sizes, most emphasise a positive school culture, and a number of wealthier schools highlight their buildings and the number of sportsgrounds they possess.

In this new paradigm, schools will have to focus on the drivers of performance. The leading schools will increase their focus on teacher effectiveness. School leaders will compete vigorously with other schools and other systems for the teachers that most increase student learning. They will hire from universities that have the best record in producing these teachers and also poach them from other schools. This is already starting to occur. Some see it as a negative but they are denying teachers the salaries they deserve. Competition for the best teachers should produce substantial and long-overdue increases in teachers' salaries.

The changes to My School will mean that school leaders and school boards will have to increase their focus on performance and value-for-money to ensure that once they have hired the best teachers, their work will be continually evaluated and developed. The most-effective teachers will need to be given the recognition they deserve and under-performance will need to be addressed. This will require significant change.

Currently, over 90 per cent of teachers report that the most effective teachers in their school do not receive the greatest recognition and their school principals never reduce the annual pay increases of an under-performing teacher.

My School now provides the public with much-needed information and they will demand changes. Effective schools will have to better communicate how they increase student learning. School brochures and marketing should no longer focus on sportsgrounds or class size but on performance and teacher effectiveness. How they attract, evaluate and develop the best teachers to ensure the highest performance will have to become the new mantra.

This will substantially alter the way schools operate. We will all benefit from improved school education, but hopefully the greatest positive impact will be on the teaching profession. Many believe My School attacks teachers but a greater focus on school finance and performance will elevate the profession to new heights.

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