

www.grattan.edu.au

To get better students you need better teachers

Published in The Australian, page 14, Monday 18 April 2011

*Improving teaching standards and feedback are crucial to maintaining opportunities, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

Australian students are falling behind their peers in other countries. While students in many countries continue to improve, we are spending more but achieving less. Change is required if children are going to have the same opportunities their parents had.

All the evidence shows that investing in teachers' effectiveness is the key to improved student performance. But which reform can best achieve this? It is clear: constructive feedback to teachers linked to a comprehensive appraisal of teaching and learning in classrooms has the greatest impact on student performance.

The Grattan Institute's report *Better Teaching Appraisal and Feedback: Improving Performance*, released today, shows that a system of meaningful appraisal and feedback for teachers will increase their effectiveness by 20 to 30 per cent. It will address teachers' concerns about the current systems of evaluation: 63 per cent of teachers report that appraisals of their work are done purely to meet administrative requirements; 91 per cent say the best teachers do not receive the greatest recognition.

For change to be lasting, schools should be in charge of teacher appraisal and feedback. They should define what is effective teaching and learning in their school, and set objectives based on their definition.

The key to addressing teachers' concerns and improving learning are the methods used to provide appraisal and feedback against teachers' objectives. At the moment, assessment and feedback are largely tick-a-box exercises that are not linked to better classroom teaching, teacher development or improved student results. We propose a different system based on providing continual feedback on effective learning in classrooms to improve teaching.

This can be achieved by schools choosing four of eight methods to assess teachers and provide feedback. These are: student performance and assessments; peer observation; observation of classroom teaching and learning; student surveys; parent surveys; 360-degree assessment; self-assessment and external observation.

The evidence shows these methods provide comprehensive feedback to teachers that directly links teaching to improved learning. Our extensive dialogue and interviews with school principals and teachers across the country shows these systems work. They not only improve the careers of teachers but also substantially raise student performance.

It is inevitable that whenever we talk about appraisal and feedback, some want to concentrate on under-performing teachers. This is misguided and does not improve student learning. Our proposal concentrates on improving teaching, not sacking teachers.

Let's be clear, no one wants ineffective teaching in our classrooms. The systems are not addressing these problems: 71 per cent of teachers report that poor performing teachers in their school will not be dismissed.

But the answer is not to dismiss teachers based on NAPLAN tests, or to send an inspector to a school who will walk around and then declare that this is your best teacher and this is your worst.

Instead, the best way to address under-performance is to provide feedback to all teachers based on appraisal of teaching and learning in their classrooms. This will raise the effectiveness of all teachers, including those viewed as under-performing. A percentage of teachers will still be unable to raise their effectiveness. They may not be able to meet the demands of professional teaching; to respond to their development opportunities or the feedback from their peers. This system – through meaningful feedback based on comprehensive appraisal – creates a fair and equitable process to address under-performance.

Governments need to support this reform above all others if they wish to improve teaching and student outcomes. Increasing transparency and choice are important. But the largest gains in student performance are achieved through meaningful feedback directly linked to comprehensive appraisal of teaching and learning in classrooms. Governments have a clear role in promoting these systems and ensuring a degree of uniformity about what constitutes effective teaching and learning. Appraisal of and feedback to school principals will also be crucial to ensure an equitable and fair process for teachers.

This is a large and difficult reform aimed at improving teaching and learning. It recognises the complexities of teaching and the need for continual professional learning linked to improved student performance.

Many school leaders (teachers and school principals) will have to assume greater responsibilities for improving the effectiveness of other teachers. This will not be easy but in schools and systems where these changes have been made, collegiality and job satisfaction have sharply increased. In other words, the beneficiaries of these changes will be teachers themselves. Only one group will benefit more: our children.

Ben Jensen is director of the School Education Program at Grattan Institute.

Ben Jensen
Program Director – School Education, Grattan Institute
Contact: 03 9035 8117 or ben.jensen@grattan.edu.au

www.grattan.edu.au