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Deafening Silence from Pollies about Declining Student Performance

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*No one has offered even a promise, let alone a plan, to lift educational achievement, writes **Ben Jensen**.*

Two worrying trends are evident in Australian school education. First, the performance of Australian students compared with other countries is declining.

The latest results from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment that assesses 15-year-olds' reading, scientific and mathematical literacy in 65 countries showed Australia was one of only four countries to have a big decline in student performance between 2000 and 2009.

The disadvantage this creates for our children is magnified by the continued rise in the performance of education systems in East Asia. Fifteen year-old students in Shanghai now perform at a level equivalent to about one year above the performance of 15-year-olds in Australia in reading literacy and the equivalent of about two years in mathematics.

The second concern is there has been no response to these results in the six months since their release. Our political leaders do not take this problem seriously.

It is difficult to determine which is worse, the declining performance of our students or the lack of a response to it.

Debate about education in Australia is too narrow. In Queensland, the media focus on the release of the PISA results was on the greater performance of its students compared with NSW. In fact, the performance of students in Queensland went slightly backwards between 2000 and 2009, but the performance of NSW students fell further.

We need to broaden our horizons in developing school education and benchmarking our performance. There is little point in each state and territory trying to be better than each other if, overall, our systems continue to fall in comparison with our East Asian neighbours and the other leading countries.

Despite all the political rhetoric and promises, I cannot remember a single politician providing a clear plan, or even a promise, to lift our students to the best in the world.

Victoria and NSW have new governments and the Queensland election is looming.

This offers new opportunities. New governments often have longer time frames in their planning as history has shown they will normally have at least two terms in government.

Our three most populous states can transform Australian school education with a strategic plan to make their students the best performing in the world.

The evidence is clear that to turn around a low-performing school an essential first step is to raise expectations for student performance and develop a plan for students to achieve those expectations. This has happened, often with great success, at the individual school level.

However, there is a reluctance to apply this at a system level. This denies our children countless opportunities and restricts Australia's future economic and social prosperity.

Numerous other countries have taken these steps.

In Britain, higher targets for the performance and attainment of their students have been set in response to improvements in leading Asian countries.

They realise the welfare of their students, and their country, depends on being able to compete in the future with Asian countries that not only have large and growing economies but also highly educated workforces.

They realise that if they don't improve now, then the gap between their students and those in many East Asian countries will continue to grow.

Similarly, declining performance (although not as steep as in Australia) is leading to a greater focus on teacher evaluation and development in The Netherlands. Given the evidence showing its effect on student performance, the Dutch are particularly interested

in developing systems of peer evaluation and improved feedback for teachers to improve their performance.

There is more that can be learned from systems in East Asia than Britain or The Netherlands, but we need to follow them in appreciating the need for change to improve student performance.

We need to set clear objectives for our students to be the best performing in the world.

Our children's future should not be risked because of a lack of ambition from our political and education leaders.

Our children have the potential to be the best performing in the world. We should provide them that opportunity.

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