But we must put the focus on how teaching contributes to student learning, writes Ben Jensen.

Arne Duncan was in no mood to hedge or soften the truth. Speaking to 23 of the world’s leading education ministers in New York, Barack Obama’s Education Secretary said that US schools were in trouble. The US was failing to attract, develop and retain the teachers it needed. Its teaching profession does not have the professional status enjoyed in some countries.

He spoke with brutal honesty, and with humility. And education leaders from around the world attending the International Summit on the Teaching Profession agreed. Sitting in the room, you had a sense that a sea change in education policy was needed, and in some places was well under way.

I was fortunate enough to attend the recent summit and for Grattan’s recent report Catching up: Learning from the best school systems in East Asia to be provided to delegates. It is the most high-level meeting of education policymakers in the world and provided important insights and challenges for education policy in Australia.

The summit, hosted by the US Department of Education, OECD, Education International (the global federation of teacher unions), invited the minister and teacher union leaders from 24 of the world’s highest performing and rapidly improving school education systems. Australia was invited but chose not to attend.

The summit identified important trends in school education and has a direct impact on policy in many countries. There are clear challenges to improve student outcomes in Australian education and many of the issues raised in the summit need to be addressed to improve student outcomes in Australia.

Many countries talked about the challenge of developing a teaching profession for the 21st century skills required of students. Most countries are trying to increase creative problem-solving, communication and teamwork skills in their schools. But it is clear that all countries are struggling with this challenge. One delegate put it best when he remarked that we have a very good idea of which 21st century skills are required of workers in 2012. But we have little idea of the 21st century skills required of workers in 2050. This is particularly salient considering that a child starting primary school today will be mid-career in 2050.

It was encouraging to hear at the summit that more countries were favouring a long-term approach to dealing with shortages and mismatches of teacher supply and demand.

Australia has a surplus of teachers in some subjects, but shortages in other subjects and in some geographic locations. Some countries in similar situations have fallen into the trap of lowering entry standards and getting less qualified and less able people into schools to fill teacher shortages. But there is growing evidence that this has large negative impacts in the longer term.

A more beneficial approach is to maintain — or preferably increase — entry standards, resulting in fewer people reaching the level required to be a teacher. This can lead to difficulties with teacher shortages in the short term, but these are quickly erased as the profession becomes more attractive. Some states in the US used this strategy to turn teacher shortages into surpluses. Creating and maintaining an elite teaching profession is vital for students and for growing the supply of teachers. Many times have I heard educators in Singapore say that they would rather let a teaching vacancy go unfilled rather than give it to a less effective teacher.
A feature of very high-performing systems, particularly those in East Asia, is that teachers are researchers, continually improving practice in their school and throughout the system. It was a breakthrough during the summit that a number of countries emphasised the need to improve policy in this area. This was coupled with a need for increased feedback and professional collaboration for teachers.

Australia, in general, has low levels of teacher professional collaboration. Despite rhetoric of a collaborative profession, and teachers saying they want more of it, there is relatively little team teaching and collective learning activities compared to many countries. Meaningful collaboration can be increased, and our primary schools (the source of many innovations) are often leading the way.

Australia has a very long way to go before teachers are considered practising researchers.

A key facet of the best education systems is that policy always focuses on student learning rather than teachers. Australia, like the US, still focuses too much on teachers. This focus, for example, puts the debate on teachers' qualifications rather than how initial teacher education improves student learning; professional development quotas rather than in-school research and developmental classroom observation; teacher accreditation for promotion rather than meaningful appraisal and feedback within schools to improve learning.

It was interesting that the summit never reached this higher level. It may have been due to many of the 23 countries present still focusing too much on teachers, rather than student learning, in their domestic policy. Shifting policy to solely focus on student learning is one of the biggest challenges facing education policymakers in this country.

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