

Sorry, but we do need more money to improve student learning

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*A major reform is required and in Australia that can't be done without more funding, writes **Ben Jensen***

Student learning in key areas is stagnating. The latest National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy results show little change in our children's numeracy and literacy between last year and this year.

As children progress through their education, each year more of them will fall behind, and despite the rhetoric of individualised instruction and student-centred learning, we are woeful at helping them. In Year 3, the percentage of students at or below national minimum standards of literacy and numeracy is 8 per cent to 16 per cent (with the percentage varying across subject areas). By Year 9, the percentages have increased to 23 per cent to 38 per cent. This doesn't mean NAPLAN is not working. NAPLAN is an indicator and we now can track whether our education programs are effective. NAPLAN provides a consistent evidence base on which to improve policy and practice.

Some argue that schools are preoccupied with NAPLAN, with widespread teaching to the test. The evidence does not support this. There are isolated examples of this, but if these examples were widespread then surely we would see improvement in NAPLAN results (unless schools are very ineffective in teaching to the test).

Seeing improvements in one year is always difficult but I fear that we are starting to plateau just as we have in international assessments. Outside of the home, what most affects student learning is the effectiveness of teaching in the classroom. Therefore, we need to focus all our efforts on improving teaching. This is what high performing systems around the world do and it is what our best schools do. It sounds obvious and the rhetoric from many education leaders reflects its importance. But scratch the surface and it is difficult to see how many of our education reforms actually improve teaching in classrooms.

Consider a list of the biggest debates in Australian school education: curriculum and assessment reform, funding formulas, school autonomy and competition, sacking underperforming teachers, reducing class size, teacher pay for- performance, school building, computers and information technology, and – our most toxic debate and the saddest part of education in this country – government v non-government schools. We are investing considerable resources into just about every aspect of school education except a comprehensive strategy to improve teaching in classrooms.

This is why Grattan Institute reports have highlighted that education expenditure in government and non-government sectors has increased substantially for decades but it has been focused on the wrong areas.

Some have used our reports to oppose increased expenditure and justify cuts in spending. But kneejerk opposition to increased expenditure misses the point. Just as across-the-board increases in funding are misguided without the right strategy, so are across-the-board cuts. You can't justify cuts in expenditure without a detailed plan to improve learning and teaching. Money is not the answer to our problems but fundamental change is required and the history of reform in this country, in any policy area, shows major reform costs money.

So how do we focus on teaching? We must start with a new understanding of education reform: improving learning and teaching is all about behavioural change. This fundamentally changes the policy approach. It puts the resources into implementation changing behaviours every day in every classroom rather than broad policies.

High-performing systems and schools understand this. They begin with a detailed understanding of the complexities of effective learning and teaching. They identify the path to take learning and teaching from where they are to where they need to be. They build teacher capacity; education leaders role model and reinforce effective behaviour. Most importantly, all programs need to be aligned so that all resources are focused on improving learning and teaching.

It is a difficult and resource-intensive process. It is therefore costly and where money has the greatest impact. Grattan Institute reports have never said that effective education was cheap. And no system has discovered a way to address inequality with inadequate resources. We have shown that reforms in other systems have been successful while spending less than us. But they have let go of the policy debates that still dominate Australian education. Our best schools understand this and are already showing us the way forward.

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