

We have much to learn from education systems in Asia

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*To be isolationist robs our children of the best the world can offer, writes **Ben Jensen***

The Asian Century white paper sets out a vision for Australia to be one of the world's top five performing school education systems by 2025. The challenge is immense: 15-year-old maths students in Shanghai are already two years ahead of their Australian peers. Australia needs serious reform that breaks the status quo.

That is precisely why opposition to the education proposals in the white paper is already forming. It builds on longstanding elements in some Australian education circles: a reluctance to compare performance in education and a culture that is uneasy with academic excellence.

But we have seen this opposition before. Some of the same arguments that are being used to object to broad education reform now were used to attack reform in previous decades. Back then, though, opposition to reform focused on attempts to improve low performing schools.

In the 1970s and 80s, student assessments revealed very low academic performance in some schools, some of which were in poorer communities. But instead of using the information to assess how to improve these schools, reform opponents defended their performance.

Three areas were targeted. First, the student assessments were attacked as unfair and biased towards students from wealthier communities, and often dismissed as assessing irrelevant material.

Second, and more broadly, it was seen as simply unfair to compare students from poorer communities with other students. Third, the strengths of these schools in poorer communities were highlighted, with non academic virtues often given greater importance than academic ones. Mixed in with all of this was the notion that the comparisons insulted lower performing schools.

Thankfully, many brilliant educators across this country and others have shown that schools in poorer communities can lift their performance by raising expectations, investing in learning and teaching, and installing a belief that all students can achieve regardless of their background. This inevitably begins with a fair and frank assessment of learning, teaching and leadership in schools.

Today, opponents of reform are using similar arguments to dismiss the ambitions of the white paper and what we can learn from high-performing school systems in East Asia. Again, the arguments ignore the evidence.

First, student assessments of East Asian schools are being attacked as unfair, biased and irrelevant. The OECD Program for International Student Assessment on which the world rankings are based measure problem-solving skills. Countries are free to determine the areas they want to assess based on their judgments of the skills and abilities their young people will need in the future.

Like all tests they have their problems and struggle to measure creativity, but it is ridiculous to dismiss their results when systems in Asia top the world rankings.

The OECD does extensive testing to control for any national bias. The results are publicly available and show no evidence of bias towards Asian nations. Since Shanghai topped the world rankings, there have been accusations of cheating, of testing only particular schools or students, and that

Shanghai spent years preparing for the test. None of these claims have any supporting evidence. When Finland topped the world rankings there were no claims of cheating.

Second, just as opponents of reform opposed comparisons of students in previous decades, now some claim it is unfair to compare Australian students with those from Shanghai, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong. It is often said that Australian students are disadvantaged by comparisons with Shanghai because it is a city.

Yet gross domestic product per capita in Shanghai is about one third of income levels in Australia. If we compare 15-year-old Shanghai maths students with their peers in Australian cities, as opposed to all Australian students, the two-year gap shrinks slightly to a year and 11 months. But if we properly level the playing field to control for socioeconomic background, then it balloons out to more than 2 ½ years.

Again, stereotypes and prejudices have come to the fore. In the build-up to the release of the Asian Century white paper, one professor of education went so far as to dismiss any lessons from these systems because "they are not real countries" and "Korea is only half a country". Would anyone dismiss lessons from Ireland because "it is only half a country"?

Finally, some claim that the idea there are things we can learn from systems in Asia is to insult and belittle the success of Australian schools. This was never a concern when experts highlighted lessons from the US, Finland or other European countries.

While we must not lose sight of the best elements of our education systems, we have much to learn from systems in Asia and elsewhere. To be isolationist robs our children of the best the world can offer. Not comparing our students with the best in the world regardless of where they are from will only hurt them and their future.

Our educators won the battle on low-performing schools. The task now is to lift all schools so we can be among the world's five top performing nations by 2025.

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