Wrong fix for failing schools

Published in The Weekend Australian, Page 13, Saturday 23 February 2013

Raising teachers' classroom skills is far more important than raising money, writes ***Ben Jensen***

On Wednesday, the Independent Schools Council of Australia fired the first big shot in this year's school funding debate.

ISCA threatened to release figures showing that many private schools would be worse off under the federal government's new Gonski school funding model.

The government hit back immediately, saying the numbers were wrong. The federal opposition claimed the government was reviving the private school "hit list" supposedly created by former Labor leader Mark Latham. It's an election year, but Australians have seen this school puppet show many times before.

For decades, politicians and educators have argued over funding, and whether more money should go to public or private schools. As they did, children's learning was neglected. Our primary school students have the lowest literacy levels of any country in the English-speaking developed world. The performance of our secondary students is falling. The average 15-year-old maths student in Australia performs at a level two years below their counterpart in Shanghai.

The problems are at both ends of the academic ladder. Fewer high-performing 15-year-olds are reaching the top literacy and mathematics levels than in 2000.

At the bottom, one-quarter of Year 4 students do not meet minimum international literacy proficiency benchmarks. Too many of these students will drop out of school and, in time, society.

It is an appalling situation. The schools debate in Australia has always focused on money: how much and who gets what. How children learn, and how to help them learn better, has been pushed aside.

It is time for a new story in Australian school education. Not whether public or private is better or deserves more funds, not whether teacher and principal performance pay, school autonomy or computers will lift the quality of our schools. Not wasting money on reducing class sizes.

None of these policies has been found to do much at all for student learning. Instead, the world's best school systems – in Finland, Ontario, Singapore and Shanghai – focus relentlessly on how to improve what happens in the classroom.

That means the creation of a strong culture of teacher education. It means teachers having mentors, getting proper feedback about their work, being required to do research on education in collaboration with other teachers, under an umbrella of sustained professional learning.

Some Australian schools are heading down this path, but too few. Instead, we're again arguing over a pot of money.

Commissioned in 2010 by then education minister Julia Gillard, the Gonski review recommends a $5 billion annual increase in school funding. It also proposes ending what its final report calls the "outdated and opaque' Howard government formula for the funds the commonwealth provides to state governments, Catholic and independent schools.

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

The stated goal of Gonski is to lift the performance of schools and to reduce the inequalities among them, which the review says are among the worst in the OECD. Gonski recommends a base funding amount per student with additional funds for disadvantaged students. While all schools would benefit, more money would probably go to the government system because it has more underprivileged students.

In its response to Gonski, the government promised that no school would be worse off under the new regime. At a stroke, the price tag went up to $6.5bn.

It is not clear where the cash will come from. The states say they cannot afford what the commonwealth is asking from them. The opposition never tires of saying that the government is spending funds it doesn't have.

All school sectors – government, Catholic and independent – are lobbying fiercely to ensure their schools get the biggest possible piece of the pie.

Despite its strengths, the Gonski review retells the same old, and failed, story of Australian education: that the only way to fix our schools is to spend more money and to change the way it is divided between schools and students. David Gonski and his team were not asked to do more than come up with a new formula for school funding, so it is not their fault that they repeat this narrative. But we need to do better.

Supporters of Gonski claim it is a "once-in-a-generation opportunity". That will be true only if the money is well spent. If it is spent the way education money has been spent in the past, it will be a complete waste – and risk dooming further reform efforts for a generation.

Across the past decade, education spending has increased by nearly three times as much as Gonski is proposing, yet our school performance has stagnated or fallen. Australia is one of just four OECD countries in which 15-year-olds went backwards on international assessments between 2000 and 2009.

Of course, money matters, yet a new school narrative would see Gonski not as a pot of money into which everyone can dip a hand but rather as a catalyst for real reform.

And change need not be expensive.

Gonski's $6.5bn increase is a 14 per cent increase on the $46bn that state and federal governments already spend each year on school education in recurrent (not capital) expenditure.

Across the past decade, federal expenditure has increased by about 85 per cent to $14.4bn, nearly one-third of recurrent school expenditure. The states are spending an extra 27 per cent, to about $32bn.

The government says it will push the implementation of the Gonski reforms out as far as 2020. But if we merely maintain the trend in expenditure of the past decade, we will reach Gonski's $6.5bn increase in less than four years. Gonski is hardly the monumental shift that its supporters and critics say it is.

With the states under extreme budget pressure because of the drop in GST revenues, it is the federal government that will have to provide the bulk of the increase. Some of its school programs – including the digital education revolution and smarter school programs – are due to expire soon. Combined with

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

efficiency savings in the federal Education Department, not renewing these largely ineffective programs would save $1bn a year.

But if the states were to contribute as little as 1 per cent extra in real expenditure (down from their decade-long trend of 2.4 per cent), and the federal government temporarily increased its rate of expenditure growth to 10 per cent (up from 6.5 per cent), then Gonski would be paid for in three years. In the longer term, the states could increase their share as their budget positions improved.

But it's time to break away from our history of raising spending without increasing learning. In the past decade, many of the best education thinkers have gone back to basics.

From Michael Barber's report *How the World's Best Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, through Ben Levin and Michael Fullan's road map for reform in Ontario, to findings from the OECD's *Program for International Student Assessment*, a host of high-quality studies have come to the same conclusion. The best schools and school systems focus single mindedly on children's learning. To improve learning you have to improve teaching.

It sounds self-evident, doesn't it? Surely every school system puts learning first? Actually, no.

For the past 10 to 20 years, the policy that has driven spending increases is reducing class size. All the evidence from here and overseas shows that reducing class sizes is incredibly expensive and provides marginal improvements in student learning at best. Yet both sides of politics and public and private school sectors have focused on reducing class sizes.

It has been a huge waste of money. If it continues, all of Gonski's $6.5bn would be eaten up by decreasing average class size by just 3.8 students.

But there's good news, too. Some of our best schools are already acting on the evidence of what works. And they are not necessarily the schools with lots of money.

Holroyd High School in western Sydney has rejected the push for smaller class sizes and instead focused on what works for its students. The school is in the bottom quarter of the most disadvantaged in the country. Many of its 508 students are recent arrivals in the country; 37 per cent have been in Australia less than three years and 61 per cent less than seven years; 85 per cent come from a non English-speaking background. About half are refugees.

Spend time at Holroyd, listen to the way teachers talk among themselves and to students, observe the respectful, focused way both groups behave in class, and you quickly see that this is a school with strong leadership committed to improving learning and teaching.

The school has a strong mentoring system for new teachers. All teachers receive support and feedback on how to improve their students' learning. Teachers are given time to work together to diagnose student performance and then structure teaching to improve it. For years the principal, Dorothy Hoddinott, has told her teachers and students that the status quo is not good enough. We must set the bar much higher, she says. And they have.

About half of all students in the school go on to university, a figure well above the national average, let alone the average for disadvantaged schools. Holroyd mathematics students progress at a faster rate than in other schools in NSW. Its children are engaged and happy. They want to learn.

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

The gains made at Holroyd could be spread across the country. If governments and schools are looking for a good way to spend the Gonski money, five programs would introduce world's best practice to Australian education and form the core of a new strategy that focuses on children's learning. They are:

School principal training
Most Australian school principals are offered very little leadership development or management experience. But great schools have great leaders. In Singapore, teachers with leadership potential are signed up to mentoring and development programs early in their career. They enter an intensive six-month, executive-style leadership program that focuses on leading reform in schools. Even after becoming principals, they continue to be mentored and study with peers as part of their professional development. Approximate cost: $181 million a year to train all school principals in the next four years.

Teacher mentoring
Young teachers in Australia say that mentoring programs are largely administrative exercises that rarely locus on children's learning. In Shanghai, every teacher has a mentor. New teachers have two: one subject-based and one to improve general pedagogy. Mentors observe teachers' classes, help them plan lessons and discuss with them how their teaching can improve. New teachers also watch their mentors teach at least twice a week. Approximate cost: $2.1bn a year.

Teacher research groups
Schools in Shanghai dedicate time for teachers to work together in groups to discuss teaching practices and to conduct research on how to improve children's learning. Teachers form groups at the start of each year to work on a particular issue (teaching students with special learning needs, for example). They spend the first third of the year researching the best teaching techniques, the second trialling practices in each others classroom and the third assessing the impact on students, throwing away what didn't work and building on what did. Approximate cost: $1 billion a year.

Teacher appraisal and feedback
The most recent OECD teacher survey shows that Australia has one of the most ineffective systems of teacher appraisal in the world. In Singapore, multiple sources of feedback – including peer and external observation, student assessments and parent feedback – are used to assess and improve learning and teaching. A system that allowed schools to use four of these methods to provide feedback to teachers would create world's best practice in Australian schools. Approximate cost: $1.5bn a year.

Specialist literacy and numeracy teachers in every primary school
One in four primary school students fails to reach international literacy benchmarks. Many of them will disengage from schooling once they reach secondary school. In Finland, students receive specialist teaching the moment they fall behind. Individual support greatly reduces inequities and lifts overall performance. Putting one specialist literacy teacher and one specialist numeracy teacher in every Australian primary school would not only have a profound effect on struggling students but all pupils would benefit by the prevention of disruptive behaviour that comes when students fail. Approximate cost: $1.7bn a year.

These programs total just under the $6.5bn Gonski mark. They are reforms that have been shown to work in Australia and overseas.

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

But teachers cannot be expected to do all of this on top of their present workload. These programs often fail because they don't account for teachers' time. Hence, we have costed them by making additional teacher time.

The programs need to combine with significant reforms to areas such as initial teacher education, maths and science education, teacher salary and career structures, and reforms to teacher supply and demand that will lift the status of the profession.

These all cost money, but they can be achieved if we use Gonski as a trigger to change not only how Gonski money is spent but also how all resources are allocated in school education.

This year, the Grattan Institute will work with schools across the country to reallocate their budgets to achieve world's best practice.

The role of the federal government in these reforms must be minimal. The stales and non-government sectors run school education.

At present, the federal government intervenes in virtually all areas of school education. This makes real reform harder.

Instead, the federal government should increase accountability for spending by shining a light on student learning outcomes, particularly for the disadvantaged students identified by Gonski.

Australian governments face three choices. First, they can ignore or delay Gonski and continue down the same path of declining student performance.

Second, they can spend the Gonski money in the same way they have always done and student performance will almost certainly continue to decline. In four more years our primary school students' literacy may not only be the worst of any English-speaking developed country but in the entire developed world.

Third, they can use Gonski to transform school education. The reforms must change how all money is spent in schools. We need a compact that says we will no longer spend limited funds on policies that don't work.

It's time for real reform. Our children deserve it.

Ben Jensen is the School Education Program Director at Grattan Institute

www.grattan.edu.au

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