

SUBMISSSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the interim report on the National School Reform Agreement.

My comments are made in all seriousness, though they address the general issue of education, particularly school education which is the focus of government policy rather than simply the Agreement. In doing so I want to point out the severe deficiencies in the present policies concerning learning in schools and the significant influences.

The Commission asks for comments on the nature of the next agreement.

My key question is what contribution will a new agreement make to improvement of education, or more properly student learning, at schools throughout Australia.

The shortfalls in the current agreement noted in the Commission's Report suggest that there is a level of disagreement or lack of commitment by Ministers in the States and Territories to this process.

First, education policy deals only with schools though the influences on learning achievement by school students are many and complex. In respect of some of them, unless they are addressed improvement of student learning at school, if there is any, will be more costly and significantly less effective than it should be.

I note that funding is outside the scope of the Commissions' review. However, it is critical as the first Gonski report and the ongoing debate about equity and funding demonstrates unequivocally.

I also note the following comments:

- *While much can be done within education systems to lift student outcomes and make them more equitable, some barriers to education, such as secure housing tenure, are beyond the capacity of schools to address. The Commission has focused on factors that can operate 'within the school gates'.*
- *There can be a substantial gap between high level policy discourse and classroom practice. Several stakeholders have identified a lack of clear visibility about what occurs in the classroom. Equally, stakeholders have pointed out the remoteness of policy discussions from the lived experience of teachers and school leaders.*

The Commissions' focus is understood but the problem remains. Unless the issues with greatest influence are addressed the hoped-for student learning gain will not be achieved.

Economic issues and what actually goes on in the classroom are critical and are not dealt with in the Reform Agreement. As a result, the efficacy of the Agreement is questionable! There is substantial knowledge about both issues, including the second.

The assertion is often made that not enough is known about what contributes most significantly to learning. The literature from research on education is vast, of high quality and international. The findings have been applied in some countries but unfortunately not to the required extent in Australia. The assertion is wrong and utterly unhelpful. Schools are organisations: we know a great deal about what makes them successful, and the lessons can be applied to schools.

But it is not the lessons of corporatisation and market economics, increasingly criticised by leading economists worldwide! I won't address the assertion in the subsequent report by the Commission that compared with research in the health field, knowledge in the education field lacks rigour. This is both wrong in general and misunderstands the nature of the problems being addressed. Teaching and learning aren't woodwork or physics: the same inputs don't always achieve the same results because people vary considerably for a whole host of reasons!

The critical influences are

- 1, early childhood influenced by the SES background of the family and the mother's education level.
- 2, the nature of the parenting and the extent to which a variety of activities are provided to expand the child's learning opportunities
- 3, the availability of early childhood education and care centres, especially in the case of less advantaged families and the financial cost to the family of access and other conditions for subsidy where they apply
- 4, the SES profile of the school enrolment, which in part is influenced by the funding levels which is a factor in parent choice.
- 5, the influence of peers and involvement in school activities including such things as music and out of school activities, both cultural and sporting.
- 6, the influence on learning by the administration of summative standardised tests such as NAPLAN

I want to make some general comments on schools and teaching and learning

The Efficacy of a National Agreement

The National School Reform Agreement makes school education hostage to the political and ideological issues which govern each individual State and Territory Government. Each state has different views and the differences are magnified when all six states and two territories have to agree. (It is reasonable to assert that in Australia, if one wants to solve a major challenge the best way to counter it is to recommend that a national policy be developed.)

One aspect of the Australia wide approach is the assertion that the curriculum should be common to all states. That again complicates matters for no great gain. It also misunderstands the relative importance of teacher-student relationship and the extent to which learning is actually achieved as a result.

The curriculum

The curriculum is not the most important element of the learning environment. The most important goal is the encouragement of an attitude towards learning which will guide the student's later life. It is quite possible that any curriculum would achieve that. As Professor John Hattie and others have pointed out, the greatest impact on student achievement is what the child brings from home and the next most important is the skill of the teacher, which most certainly doesn't just mean content knowledge.

Of course it is necessary that certain fundamental abilities and essential knowledge are acquired by every student. But there is evidence that creativity, typical of young children, declines in later years. The fact that students are more likely to follow the methods they are taught than those they discover for themselves is relevant. Traditionally a lot of emphasis was placed on the correct way to do things and the correct result. Where the student has a substantial involvement in discovering "truths" for themselves leads to much greater learning

outcomes. That is why out-of-school activities and subjects such as those in the arts fields are so effective.

But when the argument about the history curriculum for instance involves assertions that the history of Australia from 1788 to 1945 should take precedence over a wider consideration including relations between Europeans and First Nations people and the history of later migration and the impact on the natural environment, the argument becomes merely a distraction.

The impact of parents and politicians

Parents, because they have all been to school believe they know what makes an effective school. They don't. Not in detail anyway. The performance of members of any organisation is affected by the extent to which the environment is an inclusive one, where each person's contribution is acknowledged and respected, even if it is disagreed with, and where they believe they have a reasonable degree of control over their contribution. Integrity and fairness are essential.

Compare this with the situation in schools: there is a very low level of trust in teachers by parents who are prepared even to interfere in basic decisions and, to an extent in response to that, politicians also continually tell teachers what they should be doing. One recent minister asserted teachers in public schools weren't in simple terms, up to the job compared with those in independent schools. Which is nonsense! They also often say there is no clear evidence as to what makes for effective teaching. And mandatory reporting is required against standards which they have had no part in forming. After all that what do we expect of teacher performance and student achievement?

It has to be admitted that various Ministers at various times demonstrate a lack of understanding of the issues they are commenting on in respect of various curriculum subjects. Genuine consultation with experts in the various fields and acceptance of diversity, where that is productive, would be more appropriate. Otherwise, education becomes propaganda.

Standardised testing

The application of standardised testing, formative in that it takes place long after the lessons, the content of which is being tested, has been delivered. Formative assessment, which involves frequent testing shortly after lessons, would be effective and was recommended by the second Gonski Report. Of course that would require that teachers be trusted and additional resources be allocated.

In any event the detailed statistics, in PISA reports for instance, are clearly not understood by many lay commentators including journalists and the "solutions" introduced by politicians do not address what the PISA, or TIMSS, data show. The incorporation of the NAPLAN results into MySchool, superficially admirable in giving choice, won't really contribute because understanding the data requires a level of statistical knowledge which many parents lack. People are nervous about math and indeed many do not understand the basics required. Is choice being exercised on the basis of student achievement or is it most heavily influenced by the opinions of friends and neighbours and the parents' cultural and religious beliefs?

And the PISA data are unreliable anyway because many students don't really try, partly because they cannot see the relevance to them. Further, submitting to the tests involves a preparedness to accept judgements at some future time by

people who don't actually know much about them or the learning contexts. People face future judgement with trepidation, especially if it by strangers. (That is true even though people are acquire prepared to judge others.)

Taking all that into account it is reasonable to assert that a significant reason for shortfalls in student performance is significantly due to the influence of politicians and parents. None of this is to criticize the people who compile the PISA and TIMSS results who are extremely competent with a level of patience in the face of complex data. (Unfortunately their opinion is seldom sought!) As others have observed those with most influence have much less knowledge than those who are the subject of the policies.

Accountability and transparency

There is ongoing emphasis on transparency and accountability. But those are most lacking in the performance of education ministers. The interim Report at figure 4 graphs the reasons teachers identify for leaving the profession. The first four should be especially noted: heavy workload, poor work/life balance, stress and professional regulation. Now consider the responses of ministers.

In at least one jurisdiction it has been recruitment of graduates who are near completion of their degree (Teach for Australia), a system shown by competent research in the US to not improve teaching and in any event privileges content over pedagogy. Next, performance pay which has been demonstrated to be anathema to professionals and anyway requires matching performance of one teacher rather than all the other teachers over the student's life. It isn't necessary to deal with mandatory reporting: if performance is to be assessed it should be through a process which the teacher trusts! As in any organisation.

Lessons from other countries

There is another general point which significantly lessens the progress. There is very often a seeming reluctance to consider what is going on in other countries. Though there is awareness of the system in Finland, because of its high ranking in early PISA tests, that does not extend to an identification of what lessons might be learned. Australia is not alone in this. Besides Finland, small and large countries offer important lessons.

Amongst the countries are Singapore, admittedly a city state, Canada and some European countries whose students have achieved improved PISA scores in recent times. Hopefully, the US is not looked to as any guide: its education system is amongst the worst in the world, like its health system, and is amongst the most expensive and demands more teacher hours than in most other countries. The OECD carefully analysed the lessons to be learned in a special report directed to the United States in 2009. It was ignored! That report, by the way, is an extraordinary source of information about how various education systems work. Has every education minister read that report?

By they way, one of the most knowledgeable educators in the World, Pasi Sahlberg, who held a very senior position in the Finnish education system and is widely respected internationally, has been in Australia for several years, initially at the Gonski Institute at the University of New South Wales. How many ministers have sought his views?

And it should be noted that in many countries, including Finland, student achievement as measured by PISA has, like that of Australian students, declined

somewhat. The results from TIMMS don't show significant declines. In fact they show small improvements. And NAPLAN results in general show some improvement over the period it has been running; highlighting spelling failures and taking those out of context, as has recently occurred, doesn't really help does it?

Economic impact

The proposition is often asserted that Australia's GDP would improve substantially if students improved their test scores. The link between student achievement and economic gain, was asserted by economist Eric Hanushek who called for reform of the US school education system. His assertion was due to the short run of data. The longer run shows no such relationship. If Australia's economic achievement was to be improved the current performance of economic entities should be looked at: Australian business management ranks 58th in the World and economic performance is actually by no means spectacular, to put it mildly!

And if student achievement is to be the focus for improvement then equity in the distribution of funding to various school sectors, levels of which in Australia are amongst the worst of OECD countries, as shown by PISA/OECD reports, should be addressed. Numerous education researchers such as Trevor Cobbold have been pointing that out for years since the first Gonski Report and the undermining of it by successive governments, especially Conservative governments!

I return to the points I have made above.

Early childhood is absolutely critical: it is the time of greatest brain expansion and cognitive growth and the time when understandings of relationships and the important of self-control and self-confidence are developed. These are influenced by such things as the nature of parenting and the economic and behavioural factors which apply at the time. The outcomes strongly influence the child's future including social inclusion and mental health and, importantly, the attitude to learning.

The availability and diversity of activities is greater in families with higher SES backgrounds. That is why access to free or heavily subsidized early child education and care is most critical at this socioeconomic level.

The stresses on young families can be extreme. Elaboration is unnecessary. But unless the most significant of those are addressed there will likely be damaging outcomes evident in later life. ECRC, increases health and employment and reduces crime.

Students from low SES backgrounds achieve higher learning outcomes when their class is higher SES and vice versa, high SES students achieve less in a class of lower SES.

As students approach adolescence their attention to social and relational issues increase. The influence of social media has increased and in some cases become dangerous.

Conclusions

Early Childhood: If genuine improvement in teaching and learning is to be achieved several major issues need to be addressed. After almost 20 years of extensive literature research I believe unequivocally that the first issue is early

childhood including the availability of education and care centres, especially to less advantaged families and the pressures on young families, especially economic pressures and the discrimination against women whose unpaid contribution is ignored when conditions are placed on receipt of subsidy. The behaviour of providers of course needs attention: the exploitation of opportunities through investment in centres by venture capital entities borders on the obscene!

Equity: Secondly, equity in distribution of funding needs to be achieved. The present situation, amplified by decisions of the Morrison government is untenable! It has got worse since the Gonski reports, not better. Financial support for schools which allow parents to choose schools on the basis of faith or other fundamental concerns is important but it absolutely should not mean the deprivation of adequate funding to government schools.

Ministers and teachers: Thirdly, ministers need to inform themselves of what is really understood from the huge amount of high-quality research.

Equally, the opportunities for teachers to gain understanding from research should be substantially increased through provision of study time. Whether the establishment of an organisation that gathers and analyses and distributes that is helpful is moot! In what other professional area does that occur? If the real role of school principals as learning leaders was recognised, understanding would be advanced, as in any professional organisation, through discussion groups and seminars and encouragement to update learning.

What goes on in schools: Fourthly, the understandings and acknowledgement of what actually goes on in schools, in the way that staff work and in the learning environment of the classroom, must be a focus for ministers and those charged with policies which determine the education systems. The huge reliance on metrics is unhelpful! Numbers help but they very often don't reveal what is really important.

Consider the situation in many other sectors such as the health system: have the metrics help identify problems in the relationships between doctors and nurses in task distribution? Have the alleged efficiencies achieved by entry of private providers into the sector improved the level of care? Certainly they have not in the aged care sector where the problems are notorious.

In the education sector where the outcomes, like the health sector, have a high influence on the overall wellness of the community, the commitment must be to genuine understanding and indeed to skills in counterfactual reasoning, so common in very young children, but scarce in many ideologically driven adults.

Unless the essential issues are addressed the education system is doomed to fail!