

Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

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Advancing Educational Equity: Key Challenges and Promising Solutions

The pursuit of educational equity remains a pressing challenge for Australia. Despite the significant investment in our education systems, glaring disparities persist among students, particularly in academic achievement and attainment. These gaps disproportionately affect students who have historically been minoritised or marginalised, hampering the options from which to choose post-schooling. Additionally, we teachers, who play the pivotal role in shaping the education system of the future, are under increasing pressure, including time constraints and workload challenges. Such problems are arguable amplified by teachers receiving inadequate professional learning, and working with outdated instructional approaches. Informed by the endeavours of my colleagues and I at La Trobe School of Education, this submission is aimed at addressing these issues and putting forth recommendations for a more equitable and effective education system.

KEY CHALLENGES

The Achievement Gap: A Preventable Crisis

The achievement gap in education remains a critical issue that demands urgent attention. Think Forward Educators, a grassroots community organisation representing over 19,000 teachers and educators, is at the forefront of this work. These educators are advocating for research-aligned professional learning to tackle the disparity in academic outcomes among students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Current professional learning experiences, the vast majority of which are publicly funded, often fall short in addressing this issue. Members of TFE report that many PL offerings revisit or rehash older ideas and approaches, badging them as new; while others focus on theoretical concepts with limited practical applicability, or lacking a sufficient evidence base. Consequently, teachers are left without the necessary tools and strategies to bridge the achievement gap effectively.

One such example is the prominence of ideas that relegate the role of the teacher as merely a “guide on the side” or “peer at the rear” and thus only a facilitator of children’s student-directed learning, where the weight of the evidence actually points to the importance of explicit and clear teaching for novices of new topics and skill areas, and in the initial phases of learning (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006). Approaches that value properly teacher-guided instruction do not discount the importance of students’ independent construction of new knowledge, but when [professional learning for teachers and schools](#) actively diminishes the role of teacher modelling and explanation this undermines teachers’ utilisation of effective teaching practices



as part of their repertoire.

Compounding the problem is the lack of adequate oversight into government-funded initiatives. Public money is often squandered on programs that show little to no evidence of improving educational outcomes. Decisions to continue such initiatives, despite warning signs of ineffectiveness, only exacerbate the crisis. With some notable exceptions, most education departments and systems lack a strategic vision to elevate high yield and research-aligned approaches. Many are plagued by ineffective practices and a dearth of clear direction on the most impactful techniques for teaching practice.

Teachers' Challenges with Time and Workload Pressure

Teachers, the backbone of our education system, face our own set of challenges, hampering our ability to deliver quality education. Many of the instructional approaches prevalent in our schools are based on ideas about “teaching as facilitation”, prominent since the 1980s, and fail to incorporate the latest insights from the science of how we learn. La Trobe University’s School of Education is moving to educate teachers so that they have not only valuable insights from socio-cultural perspectives and critical theory but also a repertoire of scientifically informed pedagogical techniques that allow them to meet their students’ learning needs and desires.

Hundreds if not thousands of individuals and small groups of teachers working in our schools possess valuable knowledge about the science of learning and how to make use of this knowledge to improve practice. But much of this expertise remains untapped, due to the lack of focus on effective instructional practices at the school and system level.

Moreover, professional learning experiences often do not address the core issues faced by educators. Many offerings are irrelevant to teaching and learning, further contributing to teacher frustration and stress. A paradigm shift towards collaborative planning and instructional and relational excellence as the primary focus of professional learning is needed. This would help to ensure that public money is invested in the kinds of support and learning that makes a difference to both teacher practice and their students.

Sharing Exemplary Practices: A Need for Clarity and Guidance

The sharing and amplifying of authentic and real-world examples of schools using effective educational practices is essential for educational progress as a nation. There are hundreds of successful schools that have embraced research-aligned approaches and made them their own. These successes should be highlighted and their accomplishments turned into learning opportunities to inspire and educate any teacher or school wanting to improve their practice.

La Trobe University’s School of Education is undertaking a five-year investigation into the successes and experiences of schools implementing research-aligned practices, and the benefits of school-to-school sharing of practice and experiences. Our Momentum Schools research project will help to understand how school transformational processes can succeed, and what inputs schools need to successfully implement pedagogies which align with the science of how we learn.

Currently, there are too many innovative teachers and schools encountering resistance from their own system when attempting to deviate from established practices, thus hindering their continued transformation. Members of Think Forward consistently report discouragement or active resistance to innovative practices that align with research— instead being told by system leaders to toe-the-line and not question the status quo.



The lack of clear guidance on what constitutes effective and ineffective practices only compounds the problem. Increasingly clear guidance from organisations like AERO have made strides in this regard, but the consultancy industry that schools rely on for advice and guidance remains largely unregulated and without consistent guidelines for how public money should be spent on such expertise. Consequently, outdated and ineffective practices continue to be propagated, wasting public funds and likely hindering progress.

To promote the adoption of research-aligned practices, instructional coaches knowledgeable about effective instructional techniques and pedagogies must be integrated into the educational landscape. Greater oversight into how priority funding is spent on such a new workforce would allow for increased accountability into how public money is spent and on what approaches are promoted even in informal networks such as private consultancies advising individual schools.

Increased clarity of what constitutes research-aligned practices, and increased transparency around the credentials and quality of consultants and experts offering professional learning and guidance would provide clearer guidance to schools and teachers on how to improve their practice. This change in oversight would facilitate the implementation of effective approaches in schools. Such research-aligned coaching and consultation would also address the sorely needed gap between teachers' knowledge and practice around research-informed pedagogies.

Learning & Wellbeing: Managing Priority Initiatives

A final point is that it is well known that the relationship between student wellbeing and academic performance is multifaceted and reciprocal. While engagement and wellbeing are crucial, it is essential not to lose sight of the primary goal of education: student learning and academic success. Simply focusing on engagement or wellbeing initiatives without addressing the learning barriers is insufficient to bridge the achievement gap and promote long-term wellbeing.

The success of students in their learning endeavours acts as a powerful motivator, fostering positive wellbeing outcomes. Thus, an approach that prioritises excellent teaching practices primarily would help to ensure academic success and a missing piece in the debates about school engagement and wellbeing.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strong Investment and Oversight in Funding to Ensure Research-Aligned Professional Learning

To address the achievement gap and promote educational equity, the government must prioritise sector-wide initiatives that are built upon robust scientific evidence. These initiatives must adhere to strict controls, ensuring transparency and effective oversight of public funds. Funding should be directed towards programs with a proven track record of success, leaving no room for unproven, out-dated or weakly evidenced approaches.

To ensure the effective use of public funds, stricter requirements should be enforced for providers offering professional learning and consulting services. These providers must demonstrate their commitment to scientifically supported techniques and pedagogies and showcase their ability to guide and advise teachers and schools effectively.

2. Incentivise Schools to Share Success Stories



Schools that have successfully implemented evidence-based approaches and have achieved demonstrable improvements in academic outcomes should be celebrated and amplified. Recognising and showcasing these success stories could inspire other educational institutions to follow suit, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration, as per the aims of La Trobe's Momentum Schools project.

By incentivising schools to share their experiences and best practices, educational systems could create a ripple effect, leading to positive changes throughout the entire education ecosystem.

3. Prioritise Learning and Excellent Teaching

While wellbeing initiatives play a crucial role in the overall development of students, they should not overshadow the primary focus on academic learning and excellent teaching. Governments should clearly communicate their priorities to educational institutions to ensure a clear approach to student development.

By emphasizing the importance of effective teaching practices, school systems can work towards bridging the achievement gap and ensuring that no student is left behind. Wellbeing and engagement initiatives should of course have a place, but not to the detriment of ensuring effective improvement in the instruction in key academic skills.

Final thoughts

Educational equity remains an imperative goal for Australia to achieve, and it requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders. By addressing the key challenges of the achievement gap and teacher support, and by creating oversight in the provision of professional learning to preference scientifically-aligned approaches, we can create an education system that empowers both educators and students. A strong commitment to evidence, transparency, and prioritising teacher and student learning will foster a more equitable, inclusive, and effective education system, providing all students with the opportunity to realise their full potential.

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References

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