



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Menzies Research Centre
Submitting as a: Think tank
State: ACT

Summary

The Menzies Research Centre argued in its paper *Gonski revisited: Making the education dollar work harder for our kids* (Cater, Jackson 2017) that the original Review of Funding for Schooling (the Gonski Review) did not adequately examine available evidence, including research commissioned by the review itself, on what drives education performance.

The paper concluded that the review had failed to establish that the substantial additional funding it proposed would lead to across the board improvement in individual student performance.

This submission asks the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools to examine in greater depth, the best ways to improve school outcomes in light of vigorous international debate and existing research on educational performance.

The review should consider strategies that go beyond conventional approaches of attaining comparative proficiency as a form of 'equity', and assess whether the vast resources of \$88 billion a year that the nation invests in schooling is achieving the best value for money. We suggest that by focusing purely on aggregated standards, the interests of individual students - whether performing well or poorly - can be overlooked.

We recommend the adoption of a granular approach to assessment and measurement that is focused on the child, using diagnostic data to help teachers address individual performance.

We also question the application of education spending to improve the immediate social and economic circumstances of individual students. There is abundant evidence that education offers a pathway to socio-economic advancement over a lifetime. It is far less clear, however, whether it is the most efficient way of altering short-to-medium term economic, social and health outcomes.

In so far as we recommend recourse to welfare, we do not advocate the use of large, one-size-fits-all programs in which tax transfers are applied inefficiently, incentives for self-improvement are reduced and moral hazard introduced.

Main submission

Submission from the Menzies Research Centre to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (The Review)

Summary

The Menzies Research Centre argued in its paper *Gonski revisited: Making the education dollar work harder for our kids* (Cater, Jackson 2017) (footnote 1) that the original Review of Funding for Schooling (the Gonski Review) did not adequately examine available evidence, including the research commissioned by the review itself, on what drives education performance.

The Menzies paper argued that a strategy devised by the Gonski Review to create a Student Resource Standard and a voluminous “more funding” approach was a blunt instrument, a political and administrative convenience designed primarily to address the interests of the teaching profession and secondarily their clientele.

The paper concluded that the review had failed to establish that the substantial additional funding it proposed would lead to across the board improvement in individual student performance.

This submission asks the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools to examine in greater depth, the best ways to improve school outcomes in light of both vigorous international debate and existing research on educational performance. Prudent judgement should be applied to the limitations of using public funding as an instrument to achieve desired economic and social outcomes and to the measurement of those outcomes. In particular, we urge that consideration be given to education outcomes for those at the highest and lowest levels of performance, mindful that an average outcome is frequently a misleading indicator.

In our submission, the review should consider strategies that go beyond conventional approaches of attaining comparative proficiency as a form of ‘equity’, and assess whether the vast resources of \$88 billion a year that the nation invests in schooling is achieving the best value for money. We suggest that by focusing purely on aggregated standards, the interests of individual students - whether they are performing well or poorly - can be overlooked.

We recommend the adoption of a granular approach to assessment and measurement that is focused on the child, using diagnostic data to help teachers address individual performance.

We also question the application of education spending to improve the immediate social and economic circumstances of individual students. There is abundant evidence that education offers a pathway to socio-economic advancement over a lifetime. It is far less clear, however, whether it is the most efficient way of altering short-to-medium term economic, social and health outcomes. It may be, for example, that targeted welfare programs offer a more efficient application of public money to improve outcomes in situations of extreme and multiple disadvantage.

There is an important caveat, however. In so far as we recommend recourse to welfare, we do not advocate the use of large, one-size-fits-all programs in which tax transfers are applied inefficiently, incentives for self-improvement are reduced and moral hazard introduced. The application of a blunt welfare tool is unlikely to be as ineffective as the application of a blunt public education tool.

There is growing evidence, however, that a strategy colloquially defined as “saving the world one child at a time” can be effective, particularly when combined with intelligent analysis of big data to identify cohorts of entrenched disadvantage.

Background

1. In its Issues Paper, the Review identifies its scope as including how public funding of schools should be used to:

...improve outcomes across all cohorts of students, including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically-advanced students (‘gifted’ students).

2. Further, under the heading, Review Themes, in the Issues Paper, it is stated that:

Understanding how students learn is important to providing an engaging learning environment. This is why the Review will be considering a variety of factors to determine what will have the biggest impact on every individual learner’s progress and growth.

3. The Menzies Research Centre, in its schools education paper Gonski revisited: Making the education dollar work harder for our kids, was critical of the extent to which the original 2011 Gonski review, The Review of Funding for Schooling (the Gonski Review) had considered the best available evidence on the drivers of student performance in countries and jurisdictions other than our own, as measured by OECD (international) tests.

The paper held that the principal reason why the Gonski Review’s implementation failed to achieve desired results was because of:

“Flawed public policymaking processes, most notably due to intervention by political players ... and to the failure to thoroughly consider the evidence available to the review”.

4. The paper argued that the Gonski Review had fallen back on a simple call for “more funding” and a needs-based resourcing system because of ideological preference, rather than empirically based pragmatism. We suggest that logistical factors - in the large burden placed on the Review by its terms of reference and a tight deadline driven by political expediency - meant that the Review did not fully analyse all the evidence in its possession. Even its own four commissioned research papers were lightly utilised. We urge the current Review to revisit those papers, together with the large body of external evidence accrued since, pointing to what works for children from high, middle and low student attainment strata.
5. The implication of the Menzies paper was that failure to adequately address available evidence had led to an unacceptable outcome, whereby, in 2016, Commonwealth and State expenditure on schools was close to \$88 billion (footnote 2), a startling figure in the context of the constrained fiscal circumstances that prevailed at the time of report’s release, and was likely to continue well into the next decade. Despite this massive, record investment, our rankings in international proficiency tests, though slightly above the OECD average, went backwards in science, maths and reading (footnote 3). Indeed while Australia saw its share of top performers slightly outpace the OECD average, and our low performers roughly level-peg the average, when comparing our performance with Singapore, or even Canada, it is evident we have simply been failing our kids despite good intentions. We have also been wasting vast sums of taxpayers’ money on strategies that have not worked.
6. This submission urges the 2.0 Review to reconsider all the available evidence, from here and overseas, about the best means of achieving desired outcomes. In particular, the Review should focus on the vibrant international debate about student growth versus proficiency as a means of assessing what is happening with a given student’s performance, and thus with the nation’s educational performance as a whole.

Issues

7. Beyond the OECD proficiency tests, Australia uses assessment tools, primarily NAPLAN, to measure student performance against international standards. A criticism of its design is that it encourages schools to game the system through its students, in order to get a good result, especially when compared with other schools. NAPLAN’s custodians are aware of this and have the program under constant scrutiny, seeking continuous improvement within it, to ensure findings are a genuinely useful set of indicators for policymakers and schools. We support the continued use of NAPLAN, provided its methodology and application are continually reviewed, and that its results are correctly weighed against other indicators.

8. Notwithstanding this position, there is a deficit of empirical evidence by which to measure the value for money of programs. This limits the ability to make prudent decisions between competing programs and objectively rank priorities between multiple demands for finite public funds. We are convinced a new approach to measurement is required that takes account of inputs as well as outcomes, and demonstrates the return on investment for both students and taxpayers, whether positive or negative. The new approach would take advantage of recent technology to process large data sets intelligently, and derive reliable information at a granular level. The new approach would guard against the risks of false determinism by calibrating the results of statistical analysis against the instincts and lived experiences of teachers, students and parents.
9. We caution against the “grand fix” approach to complex public policy challenges, particularly those in which human agency plays a significant part. Experience shows that the grand fix is generally ineffective and carries the risk of entrenching serious, perverse consequences. The original Gonski Review, in our estimation, risked falling into that trap. Instead we advocate a more modest approach to public policy, a start-small-grow-big approach that encourages risk taking on a controlled scale and is prepared to learn from failure. In this light, we commend the work of Peter Shergold to the Review, in his 2015 report commissioned by the Minister for the Environment, Learning from Failure: why large government policy initiatives have gone so badly wrong in the past and how the chances of success in the future can be improved (footnote 4).

Ambitions for societal transformation, however noble in intent, should be curbed. The legacy of such schemes is invariably a deficit of fulfilled expectation and can have unintended negative consequences that are hard to correct. Instead we advocate that the public policy goal be aligned with the best interests of teachers and parents; to make positive change one student at a time.

10. We question whether by pursuing proficiency, we are losing sight of the progress of individual children. Aggregated measures are of little assistance to parents or carers who quite reasonably want to know how their child alone is progressing.

Taxpayers, by extension, have strong interest in the sound investment of public money. They too want to focus on practical outcomes that will improve the lives of individuals, rather than the abstracted outcomes for a system, a school, or a country.

NAPLAN data facilitates latitudinal comparisons but is a poor measure of longitudinal change. A NAPLAN student report is a snapshot of how a child is performing against

various standards and competencies at a given time. It compares outcomes between cohorts of students, but cannot be used to assess an individual child's progress, or otherwise, over time.

We note that this was not always the case in Australia. In the 1960s, for example, primary school parents looked at a report card issued three times a year. On what was usually a small individual booklet sent home for signature, there would be a list of subjects on one side of a page. Against that, three columns showed the percentage results detailing the child's progress in each of the three terms, against him or herself. That is, if a child got 84 per cent for maths in term one, and 75 per cent in term two, it was easy for parents and teachers to tell something might be amiss. This could, ideally, be fixed in term three. On top of this, the teacher usually pointed out on a facing page why this was so, even if the note amounted to something like "does not concentrate well in class".

Today, the validity of a percentage performance measurement is contested, and the punishing regime of exams for older students has fallen, understandably, out of favour. Yet it must be said – as it is around water coolers across the country – that ordinary students could write and spell and do maths back then and probably explain the basics of photosynthesis.

We acknowledge that past approaches were flawed, and would not advocate a blind retreat towards the future. We do believe, however, that past experience can be a rich guide to determining future policy.

11. We recommend that the Review considers the implications of the current "growth versus proficiency" debate in relation to education policy. When growth becomes the prime measure of achievement, the focus returns to the progress of individual students and personalised learning models based on detailed individual data. A mounting body of research suggests such an approach works.

Other studies advocate a "proficiency" approach where students work to a set of competencies and standards. Some advocate a combination of approaches, i.e. one where fostering personal growth is combined with seeking certain levels of competency. We ask: what works best?

We note that in the United States, where globally referenced proficiency testing of school students returns result similar to those in Australia, the "proficiency versus growth" debate is occurring at the highest administrative levels. It was the subject of questioning during the new Education Secretary's confirmation hearing in January 2017 (footnote 5).

In the US, the debate revolves around whether proficiency testing alone is bad for both high and low performing students, because it encourages teaching emphasis on middle performers who make up the bulk of a given result, and the high and low

performers miss out on what they need because they do not influence results. The consensus appears to be swinging to growth, but the question is far from settled. We also note that Australia is a different environment.

The extent, if any, to which NAPLAN and its associated measurements encourages similar middle-band-and-mediocre performance is not our primary concern. The real importance of the debate is pragmatic: are an individual student's needs better served by a snapshot measure of proficiency or by measuring their individual performance over time?

We recommend, therefore, that the Review considers the available evidence about the efficacy of an individual attainment strategy, including that available here from experts, such as Laureate Professor John Hattie and others, the 2015 summary by the Grattan Institute (footnote 6), and in the United States, by an enormous range of scholars and opinion leaders (footnote 7).

12. As to parenting and the social environment, the 2017 Menzies Research Centre paper also focused in particular on the role of the home and social environment, stating:

“The task of improving opportunity for the most disadvantaged children in our community cannot be achieved by schooling alone.

“Changing the school environment without improving the home and social environment will have little or no effect. Investment in welfare reform and employment are vital if we are to reduce poverty and restore dignity to the lives of the disadvantaged and hope for their children's future. If our aim is to improve the life chances of disadvantaged children, targeted programs with measurable outcomes are likely to provide a better return on public expenditure than broadly scattered school funding.”

The Gonski Review's narrow focus on education funding meant that scant consideration was given to the link between social disadvantage and educational achievement. There is abundant evidence, for example, that the life chances of a child growing up in a welfare dependent home are severely curtailed. Educational attainment, workforce participation, criminality, poor health and addiction are closely correlated to home background. The challenge of breaking the welfare dependency cycle has been embraced by governments in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

We argue that the level of funding to a particular school will make a marginal difference at best to the educational outcomes of children who have the misfortune to be raised in circumstances of severe socio-economic disadvantage. School attendance by children in this category is spasmodic, classroom engagement poor, and support from the parent weak or non-existent.

The most severe examples of this pattern have been observed in remote Indigenous communities and have been the subject of innovative interventions focused on the needs of the child. The most effective interventions frequently require the child to be removed from the home environment.

The evidence, therefore, suggests that attention paid to improving, or offsetting, the effects of impoverished homes is a pre-requisite for educational progress. To address social disadvantage through school funding is, therefore, to put the cart before the horse.

We are persuaded by the work of Noel Pearson, as well as that by the Centre for Social Justice in the UK, evidence from welfare reform in New Zealand and other places that a concentrated focus on eliminating welfare dependency is a more effective public policy response to entrenched socio-economic disadvantage than increases to school funding.

In practice, the two must go hand in hand. Spending priorities, however, are a crucial consideration in this fiscally-constrained era. We would encourage the Review to carefully define the problem we are trying to fix. If educational disadvantage is considered in isolation without the need for calibrated welfare programs, the most severely socioeconomically disadvantaged children will be left stranded.

Footnotes

1. http://www.menziesrc.org/images/PDF/MRC_Report_Gonski_revisited_Making_the_education_dollar_work_for_our_kids_web.pdf
2. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/5518.0.55.001>
3. <http://www.oecd.org/australia/pisa-2015-australia.htm>
4. <http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=ozpisa>
5. <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/learning-from-failure/priorities/learning-from-failure>
6. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/01/delving-into-one-of-the-questions-betsy-devos-couldnt-answer/513941/>
7. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/827-Targeted-Teaching.pdf>
8. <http://www.air.org/search/site/growth%20proficiency>