



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

Submitter: The Centre for Independent Studies
Submitting as a: Think tank
State: NSW

Summary

Schools should invest in evidence-based, cost-effective policies. School investments supported by rigorous research should be prioritised.

Australian teacher professional development should be reformed. Teachers have to periodically attend professional learning as part of the national teaching standards, but the teaching practices they learn are not necessarily evidence-based, as most states and territories do not have accreditation standards for professional development providers.

There are three evidence-based investments schools should consider:

1. Early literacy and numeracy.

Intervention to help underachieving students is most effective in early primary years. Teachers' education degrees do not equip them with the knowledge necessary to effectively teach reading, and phonics instruction is not consistently taught well. Primary school teachers would be helped by attending professional development on reading instruction.

2. Give teachers fewer classes and more time outside the classroom.

Australian teachers typically spend an hour more teaching each day compared to the high-achieving countries. This means teachers have less time to plan, refine, and review their lessons.

3. Classroom management training for teachers.

Australia has high levels of classroom misbehaviour compared to the top-performing countries. Teacher education degrees do not adequately prepare teachers to handle misbehaviour. Teachers would benefit from attending professional development to learn evidence-based classroom management techniques.

There are two common school investments not supported by the evidence:

1. Smaller class sizes.

Many recent studies indicate reducing class sizes has limited — and inconsistent — positive effects. Australia’s class sizes are much smaller than several top-performing countries.

2. Technology.

Australian schools use technology significantly more than most of the OECD and high-achieving countries. There is conflicting evidence on the extent of any positive effects of education technology.

Main submission

NOTE: This submission is based on the CIS research report ‘Getting the most out of Gonski 2.0: The evidence base for school investments’ available here:

<https://www.cis.org.au/publications/research-reports/getting-the-most-out-of-gonski-2-0-the-evidence-base-for-school-investments/>

All the references for statements made in this submission are contained in the above report, along with accompanying tables and diagrams.

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1. Introduction

Australia's literacy and numeracy standards have continued to decline in recent years, despite the significant increase in spending on schools over that time. This alarming mismatch between expenditure and outcomes — demonstrated by Australia’s sliding literacy and numeracy rankings on international tests — warrant an urgent rethink about how education funding is spent. This is the most pressing task facing the Panel for the review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools.

2. The meaning of 'evidence-based' education policy

The focus of education policy must shift from simply 'more money' as a solution to instead using funding to invest in cost-effective, evidence-based policies and practices.

The quality of research underpinning particular policies and practices must be considered. There is an evidence hierarchy, which means not all evidence is equally reliable. Some school investments are objectively better than others. Investments supported by rigorous research should be prioritised; those based on high quality, large random sample quantitative analyses — as opposed to less rigorous evidence such as case studies and broad policies for which the effects cannot be isolated.

If schools do not invest in evidence-based policies and practices, the additional 'Gonski 2.0' funding is unlikely to improve student outcomes.

However, while ideally all school investments should be evidence-based, there is a strong case for school autonomy, as outlined on page 219 of the Review of Funding for Schooling: Final Report in 2011.

It is reasonable to expect state and territory governments, and non-government schools, to comply with new national policy reforms as a condition of receiving federal government funding. However, it is important the national policies are high-level and not unduly prescriptive. There is a large amount of diversity across school systems and states, which means different schools will have different needs. Rigid overarching policies will not be appropriate for all schools. Both government school systems and non-government schools must retain the ability to have practices appropriate for their own needs, and to apply the evidence to their own situations as they see fit.

One example of the need for a greater focus on evidence-based policy is the area of teacher professional learning. Australian teachers are required to periodically attend professional development activities, and do so relatively often compared to other countries, but the teaching practices they learn are not necessarily evidence-based. There is also evidence to suggest from the 2013 TALIS international survey of teachers that Australian teachers receive less benefit from the professional development they attend relative to teachers in other countries.

States and territories, with the exceptions of New South Wales and the ACT, do not have accreditation standards for professional development providers. As a result, professional development is expensive but the quality of content is inconsistent. Nevertheless, national standards for the provision of professional development imposed by the federal government would be problematic; states and territories themselves should implement more consistent and transparent standards for professional development providers.

3. Three evidence-based school investments

There are three evidence-based investments schools should consider, which have the potential to significantly and cost-effectively boost literacy and numeracy results.

a. Early literacy and numeracy

Intervention to help students who are underachieving in literacy and numeracy is more effective in early primary years than in later schooling. Schools should prioritise investing in early specialist support staff and evidence-based programs to help underachieving students.

Phonics are an essential part of the required measures to effectively teach reading. Disadvantaged students, such as students with disabilities and students from non-English speaking backgrounds, also benefit greatly from phonics instruction. This is the overwhelming conclusion based on the available evidence spanning decades.

However, according to a recent systematic review of the literature and other recent studies, Australian teachers' education degrees do not equip them with the language knowledge necessary to effectively teach reading; and phonics instruction is not consistently taught well in Australian schools.

Therefore, primary school teachers could be helped by attending professional development specifically to improve teaching of reading and phonics instruction. This investment could be paid for — in full or in part — by prioritising phonics over other, less important, professional learning.

A greater focus on early literacy and numeracy intervention and teaching would also complement the federal government's proposed Year 1 check.

b. Give teachers fewer classes and more time outside the classroom

Australian teachers spend more time on average each day teaching in class relative to the OECD and the top-performing countries, according to the latest OECD data.

This means, all else being equal, Australian teachers have less time to plan, refine, and review their lessons. These sorts of activities outside the classroom have significant positive effects on teaching quality and student outcomes, according to recent studies on the subject.

However, Australian surveys show that teachers — and new teachers in particular — do not have sufficient time to effectively plan lessons and collaborate with other teachers. It would be beneficial to give teachers fewer daily classes so they can have more time outside the classroom to improve their teaching.

The extra cost of this approach would be minimal if it was offset by other savings, such as by increasing class sizes or making teaching hours more proportional to teacher experience.

c. Classroom management training for teachers

Australia has high levels of classroom misbehaviour compared to the OECD and the high-performing countries, according to both the PISA and TIMSS latest international datasets.

Classroom misbehaviour has significant negative effects on student achievement and can be ameliorated by effective classroom management techniques. But recent research shows Australian teacher education degrees do not provide evidence-based classroom management practices to adequately prepare teachers to deal with misbehaviour.

Teachers could benefit from attending professional development specifically to learn and foster evidence-based classroom management techniques, which would not add substantial further costs if it was implemented instead of less important teacher development.

Classroom misbehavior is especially prevalent among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Australia, so this initiative could help disadvantaged students in particular.

4. Two common school investments without sufficient evidence

There are two common school investments that are not supported by sufficient evidence to justify significantly more spending.

a. Smaller class sizes

Australian class sizes are not especially high relative to the OECD or the top-performing countries. Some of the top-performing countries, such as Singapore and Japan, have much larger class sizes.

Class size reduction appears to have limited positive — and also inconsistent — effects on student achievement. Many recent studies have shown little or no positive effects of having smaller classes. Furthermore, it appears investments to reduce class sizes are not cost-effective. Smaller classes also have the potential to dilute teacher quality.

Much more evidence would be required to justify significant investments to further reduce class sizes in Australia.

b. Technology

Australian schools already use technology significantly more than most of the OECD and high-achieving countries, according to the latest PISA and TIMSS data.

The positive effects of education technology are inconsistent, depending on a range of factors. There is conflicting evidence in the recent research on the topic, but

overall there is no clear link between student achievement and the level of investment in classroom technology.

Investments in technology also have the potential to both be expensive and quickly become obsolete. One example of this was the Rudd and Gillard governments' 'Digital Education Revolution' program, which was significantly more expensive than originally estimated, had many implementation issues, and was not linked at all to improved literacy and numeracy for students.

Given classroom technology is already used much more in Australian schools relative to other countries, there is insufficient evidence to suggest investing more in classroom technology would improve student achievement.

5. Recommendations

- Schools should invest in cost-effective, evidence-based programs and policies in order to improve student achievement.
- The quality of evidence underpinning policies and program must be considered, as there is an evidence hierarchy and not all evidence is equal in terms of reliability.
- Government and non-government schools should retain their autonomy to allocate their funding for evidence-based investments as they see fit, without excessive oversight from the federal government.
- States and territories should reform teacher professional development, such that there are consistent and transparent standards for professional learning providers to deliver evidence-based content.
- Schools should invest in the following three cost-effective, evidence-based policies:
 - a. Early literacy and numeracy.
 - b. Give teacher fewer classes and more time outside the classroom.
 - c. Classroom management training for teachers.
- School should not invest further in the following two policies for which there is insufficient evidence to justify significantly more spending:
 - a. Smaller class sizes.
 - b. Technology.