

Stopping the drift in school performance requires a national action plan ^[1]



The Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Professor Geoff Masters AO, has called for a new level of cooperation between governments to address worrying trends in Australian schools.

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While governments and political parties disagree over school funding, the ACER report, *Five challenges in Australian school education* ^[2], shows performance in our schools continuing to decline.

Adequate school funding is essential. But money alone is not the answer; we have increased spending on schools and still seen standards decline. We urgently require a national action plan to target resources on proven, interconnected strategies for arresting the drift in our schools.

So what are these drifts?

First, we're seeing a long-term decline in the average achievement levels of Australian secondary students.

At the turn of the century, Australian 15 year olds were among the highest performers in the world in reading and mathematics. That is no longer the case. According to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the average achievement levels of Australian 15 year olds declined steadily from 2000 to 2012. In mathematics the decline was dramatic. In some countries, including Germany, Poland and Portugal, achievement levels improved over the same period, an improvement that went hand in hand with educational reform efforts in those countries. Between 2000 and 2012, the gap in mathematics achievement between South Korea, one of the top-performing countries in PISA, and Australia widened by the equivalent of a full year of school.

Second, there is evidence of growing disparities between our schools.

PISA shows that Australia's schools are becoming increasingly different from each other and that these disparities are increasingly linked to socioeconomic differences. The world's top-performing school systems work to minimise disparities between schools. Their aim is to provide every student with an excellent education regardless of the school they attend. In Finland, as little as five per cent of the variance in students' PISA performances is explained by between-school differences. In Australia, this percentage grew steadily from 20 per cent in 2000 to 28 per cent in 2012, suggesting that, in secondary schools, student performance is increasingly dependent on which schools students attend.

Third, teaching is becoming a less attractive career option among our more able school leavers.

The world's highest-performing school systems recognise that quality teaching is the key to better educational outcomes. They work to make teaching attractive to their best and brightest school graduates. In Singapore and Hong Kong, teachers are drawn from the top 30 per cent of school leavers; in South Korea and Finland, teachers are drawn from the top 10 per cent. In Australia, the trend is in the opposite direction. The percentage of teacher education offers made to school leavers with an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) above 70 declined from 49 per cent in 2013 to 45 per cent in 2014 and then 42 per cent in 2015. By contrast, more than 80 per cent of offers to science and engineering courses are made to school leavers with ATARs above 70.

And there are other reasons for concern. The OECD estimates that 40 000 Australian 15 year olds (14 per cent of students) lack the reading skills, and 57 000 (20 per cent of students) lack the numeracy skills, required in modern workplaces. There has been a 20-year decline in the percentage of senior secondary students studying advanced mathematics and science subjects. And, according to the Australian Early Development Census, 60 000 children in their first year of full-time school (22 per cent of children, including 43 per cent of Indigenous children) are developmentally vulnerable and at risk of long-term low achievement.

These are national challenges that transcend state borders, school sectors and political parties. They require a national response. Their origins often lie outside the reach of schools and they can appear frustratingly intractable. But international experience shows that declining performances in schools can be turned around through coordinated, sustained plans of action. A starting point would be a conversation that includes all governments, parents and

the business community about what we now want from our schools and what it will take to arrest and reverse declines in our national performance.

Professor Geoff Masters AO is the Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research. Read *Five challenges in Australian school education* <http://research.acer.edu.au/policyinsights/5>^[3]

More information

- ACER, Five challenges in Australian school education ^[2]
- The Australian, Arresting slide in school standards needs to go beyond politics ^[4]

Short Description:

A national action plan agreed by Commonwealth, state and territory governments is urgently required if Australia is to arrest declining performances in schools.

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