

# Is setting higher standards the answer?

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*Raising the expected performance standard in each year of school and holding all teachers and students accountable for achieving these higher standards may not be the most effective way to improve levels of performance in Australian schools.*

It seems obvious; the way to lift performance in schools is to introduce more rigour into the curriculum, set higher year-level performance expectations and hold all teachers and students accountable for achieving these higher standards.

This is essentially what we've been doing. We've developed a national curriculum and benchmarked it internationally. We've set clearer year-level performance expectations. We've required teachers to assess and grade all students against these expectations using 'A to E or equivalent'. We've insisted on all students sitting national literacy and numeracy tests through the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy ([NAPLAN](#)) four times during their schooling. We've made schools more accountable, including by publishing their test results on the [My School website](#). And, despite this, [results from the most recent cycle of the Programme for International Student Assessment](#) show the literacy and numeracy levels of Australian 15-year-olds have been in steady decline. NAPLAN tests show no improvement at most year levels in most of the country.

Attempting to lift performances by holding all students to the same expectation flies in the face of what we know about learning. People learn best when given learning opportunities at an appropriate level of challenge: beyond their comfort zone, but not so far beyond that they become frustrated and give up. And this is the nub of the problem. For many students in our schools, the year-level curriculum is either well within their comfort zone or so far ahead of them that they are unable to engage with it meaningfully.

The reason is that students enter each school year with widely different levels of attainment. The most advanced 10 per cent of students are about five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent. As a result, less advanced students often are not ready for, and more advanced students often are not adequately challenged by, the year-level curriculum. Raising the expected performance standard in any year of school will be appropriate for some students, but is likely to be inappropriate for students who are already struggling.

An alternative, more equitable, system would be one in which every student's current level of attainment was identified and used to provide learning opportunities at an appropriate level of challenge. Rather than teaching, assessing and grading all students against the same year-level expectation, every student's learning would be stretched and extended by well-targeted, personalised teaching.

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Success would be defined and judged in terms of the progress an individual made, regardless of their starting point, and every student would be expected to make excellent progress every year. This is an ideal, but if we could better approximate it, we may see more students learning successfully and overall levels of performance in Australian schools improve.

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