

Gonski's model for schools

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The recent Gonski report calls for a new model of school education. This is a big call. What is this new model? Professor Geoff Masters AO discusses.

In delivering his recent report David Gonski described the report's recommendations as a package of reforms to underpin a new model to improve performance in Australian schools.

Since the report's release, commentators have focused largely on existing and familiar school practices and a selection of the recommendations. Among other things, there has been discussion of personalised student learning plans, phonics teaching, online classroom assessment tools, behaviour management, explicit teaching and the relationship between teaching general capabilities and teaching disciplinary knowledge. None of this is new. Schools do these things every day.

Gonski begins with the obvious: performances in schools will improve if every student learns successfully. This is interpreted as every student making a year's progress every year, raising the question of what a year's progress looks like. But the intention is sound. Performances will improve if every student makes excellent and continuing progress – something that certainly is not happening at present.

Gonski also observes that students will learn successfully if they are taught at an appropriate level. There is strong research to support this. People learn successfully when they are given learning opportunities at an appropriate level of challenge. Learning is much less likely when people are taught what they already know or if they lack the prerequisite knowledge and skills for what they are being taught.

Most teachers understand this and attempt to teach every student at an appropriate level. But they work within external constraints. The Australian Curriculum ties what a student is expected to learn to their year level. Teachers are expected to deliver the same year-level curriculum to all students and to assess and grade them on how well they perform. This may seem sensible until it is realised that the most advanced ten per cent of students in each year of school are about five to six years ahead of the least advanced ten per cent of students. As teachers know, the year-level curriculum seriously misses the mark for many students, either because its expectations are too low or too high.

Gonski proposes to break this nexus and to redefine how we set learning expectations in schools. The heart of Gonski's model is an alternative way of structuring the curriculum. Instead of packaging the curriculum into year levels, wherever possible the curriculum would be presented as a sequence of increasing proficiency levels in a subject. This approach would recognise that students in the same year of school are at different levels of attainment, and students in different years of school often are at the same level. This concept of proficiency

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levels unrelated to students' ages or year levels is familiar in areas such as music and language learning.

Gonski's model redefines what it means to learn successfully. Rather than being judged only in terms of age-based expectations, successful learning would be measured as the progress individuals make, whatever their starting points.

Some have interpreted Gonski's proposal as requiring teachers to develop an individual learning plan for every student. This is impossible in practice. But it is possible for teachers to establish students' current levels of attainment and to ensure that they are taught at an appropriate level.

Other commentators have interpreted Gonski's proposal as abolishing year levels. This is unnecessary. There are often good social reasons to keep students of the same age together. Within each year level, the teaching challenge is to recognise and address students' widely varying levels of attainment.

Gonski's proposed restructuring of the curriculum into 'learning progressions' with aligned assessment resources would be a major change in our approach to schooling. But it has the potential to support teachers' current efforts to establish where individuals are in their learning, to meet students' differing learning needs and to ensure that every student is appropriately challenged. On balance, it may be the change we need to lift performance in schools.

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