

QUALITY AND EQUITY THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Abstract

Over the past two decades, a number of countries have attempted to drive improved outcomes and to close achievement gaps in schools using strategies adopted from the world of business, including: setting explicit expectations and targets for improvement; developing better measures of outcomes; increasing transparency; giving employees autonomy to find local solutions; imposing performance cultures in which individuals are held accountable for improved results; and implementing results-based incentive schemes (rewards and/or sanctions) to promote greater effort. At least some of these strategies have clearly not improved performances in schools. In Australia, performance levels have either flat-lined or declined over the past decade, and there has been little or no reduction in Indigenous or socioeconomic gaps. This presentation will argue that 'macro' strategies of these kinds are often ineffective because they fail to change practice on the ground. They underestimate the importance of capacity building, the creation of collaborative learning cultures and the implementation of proven teaching and leadership practices. In short, improved quality and equity depend on evidence-based 'micro' reform.

Professor Geoff
Masters AO

*Australian Council for
Educational Research*



Reforming schools and improving student achievement levels are priorities for governments around the world. But not all countries approach these challenges in the same way. In a number of English-speaking countries, particularly the United States of America, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia, school reform efforts over the past 20 years have included a number of common reform strategies.

One of those strategies has been to attempt to drive improvement by setting explicit curriculum expectations and targets for improvement. Curriculum 'standards' have been developed to make clear what teachers should teach and students should learn in each year of school, and targets for improvement have been set, such as the US government's 'adequate yearly progress' targets for schools and the Australian government's goal to be among the top five countries in the world by 2025.

To determine whether expectations and targets are being met, new performance measures have been introduced, usually in the form of student test scores. These measures have been used to monitor trends over time, establish how much 'value' each school contributes to student outcomes, and benchmark achievement levels against performances in other countries.

Better measures, in turn, have led to a push for greater public transparency about how schools are performing. In Australia, this has led to the introduction of the My School website. In the UK, league tables of 'value-add' measures have been used to compare schools and promote parental choice.

In parallel with these strategies, governments have given schools and teachers more autonomy to decide the best ways to improve student results. Self-managing schools were introduced in Victoria 20 years ago. Charter schools and other forms of self-managing schools have operated in the USA, Canada, the UK and New Zealand over the same period.

Increased autonomy has been accompanied by strengthened accountability arrangements. Governments have promoted 'performance cultures' in which system officials, school leaders and classroom teachers have been evaluated against explicit performance expectations and held accountable for improved outcomes – usually in the form of improved test scores.

And incentives for improvement have been introduced. These have included financial rewards for school improvement, teacher performance pay linked to improved test results, and sanctions such

as the withholding of funding, increased government intervention, the dismissal of school leaders and the closing of schools.

The problem is that, during the period in which these 'macro' reforms have been implemented, there has often been little or no improvement in student performance. In Australia, results have either flatlined or declined over the past decade, and achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds, have remained unchanged.

So why have results not improved? Part of the reason, I believe, is that too little attention has been given to the mechanisms by which macro reforms of this kind are expected to change day-to-day classroom teaching and school leadership practices. Too often, it has been assumed that approaches adopted from the world of business will be equally relevant to the work of schools. And too little attention has been paid to international experience and research evidence about the importance of micro-reform.

Take, for example, the evidence on incentive schemes. A major evaluation by the US National Research Council (Hout & Elliott, 2011) concluded that the international evidence over the past two decades was 'not encouraging about the ability of incentive programs to reliably produce meaningful increases in student achievement'. Worse, the report concluded that incentive programs had produced a range of undesirable school practices designed to maximise test scores rather than produce real improvements in teaching and learning.

The assumption underpinning most incentive schemes is that people know what to do and that what is lacking is effort. Carrots and sticks are designed to get employees to lift their game. But the evidence in schools – as well as in business – is that a focus on results is not enough; improvement depends on the micro-strategies of local capacity building and the creation of collaborative learning environments.

As a second example, consider the seemingly obvious and popular strategy of specifying what all students should learn in each year of school. In an effort to raise achievement levels, many countries benchmark their grade-level expectations against the curricula of high-performing countries. But a common outcome, particularly in developing countries, is that teachers find themselves teaching material several grade levels ahead of many – and in some countries, most – students. Inevitably, students, teachers and schools are then judged to be 'failing'.

Again, the research is clear. Learning is maximised when students are given opportunities and challenges appropriate to their current levels of achievement. In any given year of school in Australia, the least advanced 10 per cent of students are five to six years behind the most advanced 10 per cent of students. Rather than teaching, assessing and grading all students against the same grade-level expectations, improved learning depends on the micro-strategy of establishing and understanding where students are in their learning and then meeting individuals at their points of need.

Unless macro-strategies are effective in enhancing the quality of teaching and leadership, creating professional learning cultures in schools, and promoting the use of evidence-based methods – in other words, driving micro-reform – they are unlikely to lead to improved quality and equity in our schools.

References

This presentation will draw on the following references.

- Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. London: McKinsey & Company.
- Fullan, M. (2011). Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform. CSE Seminar Series 204. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education.
- Hanushek, E. A. (2002). The failure of input-based schooling policies. Working Paper No. 9040. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Hout, M., & Elliott, S. W. (Eds.) (2011). *Incentives and test-based accountability in education*. Report of the Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Public Education. Washington: The National Academies Press.
- Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., & Barber, M. (2010). *How the world's most improved school systems come out on top*. London: McKinsey and Company.
- Schleicher, A. (2013). Lessons from PISA outcomes. *OECD Observer*, No. 297 Q4.
- Whelan, F. (2009). *Lessons learned: How good policies produce better schools*. London: Fenton Whelan.
- Woessman, L. (2001). Why students in some countries do better. *Education Matters*, 1(2), 67–74.