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School funding system a maze that encourages blame shifting

Australia must develop a national and transparent model of school funding based on comprehensible measures of need applying equally across the sectors if the funding debate in this country is to rise above a sterile ideological battle, argues a policy paper released by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

In the first of a planned series of policy papers from ACER, Dr Andrew Dowling describes the processes of school funding that currently exist in Australia and argues that more can be done to implement a consistent and transparent system.

Dr Dowling points out that while Australian Governments spend over \$30 billion on primary and secondary schools each year, the process of school funding, including the way in which amounts are calculated, distributed and reported upon, is unavailable not only to the wider public but, to some extent, even to those working in education.

The current system for funding schools is fragmented by level of government (State or federal), type of sector (government or non-government), location (state or territory), accounting approach (cash or accrual), and even time period (financial or calendar year).

Several sources of income flow into schools, but they do not operate in unison and there is no reporting at an individual school level in a timely manner.

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School funding, which is the area of education that should be most amendable to quantification and measurement, is plagued by inconsistency. Arguably the lack of consistency and transparency in this area has a broader impact, as all other aspects of education are dependent on the primary issue of funding. It is theoretically possible to measure and report school resourcing in a clear and logical fashion yet it remains resistant to greater comparability, transparency, and accountability.

Dr Dowling argues that this situation must change and that inconsistencies plaguing the current system also encourage blame shifting between governments while important debate is stymied.

In the past, the Commonwealth and the states ritualistically allocated blame to each other using different sets of data while the real knowledge needed for a new debate - one about the relationship between student performance and school resources - failed to materialise.

The system encourages blame shifting between governments and high level claims that the Commonwealth under-funds government schools and counter-claims that most public funding goes to government schools anyway, rather than informed debate. The end result is that members of the education community, much less the general public, have no clear idea what individual schools actually receive from both levels of government nor if their income is appropriate to their needs.

The paper notes that education commentators, opposed on many issues, are united in their frustration with the existing system. Every side of the debate wants a more coordinated approach. However, the force for change is being held up by comfort with the status quo and uncertainty about change.

The paper concludes with a call of support for a recent recommendation that the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) adopts a common financial reporting instrument for government and non-government schools based on principles of comparability and transparency.

If any change is to occur in this area, it will occur through MCEETYA, the clearing-house for government coordination on education issues.

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This body should consider carefully a recommendation from a recently completed, long-term study into the future of Australia's primary schools. Recommendation eleven of this report suggests MCEETYA adopt a common financial reporting instrument for government and non-government schools based on principles of comparability and transparency.

This recommendation should be adopted because the current system is unnecessarily complex and fragmented. Funding reform is an essential plank for broader educational reform in Australia, dependent as all aspects of education are on the primary issue of funding. Improved consistency and transparency in this area would improve efficiency (by understanding better the impact of school resources on student outcomes) and equity (by understanding better the level of real need in individual schools, and funding appropriately) and as such is a worthwhile goal.

Employing similar funding methodologies at both State and Commonwealth level and between school sectors would sufficiently improve transparency and accountability to positively affect student outcomes as well as create a more sound footing for future debates.

Australia's School Funding System, by Andrew Dowling, Principal Research Fellow with ACER's Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation Unit, is available for [download from this website](#).

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Study reveals ICT proficiency of Australian students

Australia's educators and policy makers now have a comprehensive picture of the level of ICT literacy of Australia's Year 6 and 10 students following a landmark study completed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The report of the *National Assessment Program – ICT Literacy Years 6 and 10* was released this week by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). It reports on a study conducted in 2005 involving approximately 7400 students from Years 6 and 10 in around 520 schools across Australia.

Although ICT has been embraced with enthusiasm by Australian schools and students, to date there has been no national assessment program to determine how ICT literate Australian students are. In what is believed to be the first assessment of its kind, all of the testing and marking took place in a totally computer-based environment with no pen and paper components.

The assessment instrument included simulations of common application programs used to assesses student ICT skills, multiple-choice and short text responses to assess students' knowledge and understanding of ICT and live software with which students created larger authentic information products. The integration of simulated and live software applications in a single seamless online testing environment makes the Australian ICT literacy test unique.

ICT education experts from all States and Territories used the contents of the assessment to establish challenging but reasonable proficiency standards for Year 6 and Year 10.

Overall 49 per cent of year 6 students attained the proficient standard and sixty-one per cent of Year 10 students reached or exceeded the proficient standard set for their year level. However, according to ACER's deputy chief executive and lead author of the report, Dr John Ainley, ICT literacy is not developed to a uniformly high level among Australian school students.

"The assessment shows that students are adept at using the basic elements of information technology but may need more knowledge and skill in applications that involve creating, analysing or transforming information," he said.

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Differences in ICT literacy achievement were noted across socioeconomic, Indigenous and non-Indigenous and school location groups.

ICT literacy was strongly associated with socioeconomic background. Approximately two-thirds (68 per cent) of Year 6 students and three quarters (75 per cent) of Year 10 students whose parents were 'senior managers and professionals' attained the proficient standard compared to around one third (32 per cent) of Year 6 students and almost half (49 per cent) of Year 10 students whose parents held 'unskilled manual, office and sales' occupations.

ICT proficiency was also lower for students from remote locations compared to their peers from metropolitan locations and lower for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. No significant difference in proficiency was found between boys and girls and students of English and non-English speaking background at either year level.

"Consideration should be given about how best to reduce the achievement divide associated with these student background factors," Dr Ainley said. "Improving access to computers for students in non-metropolitan areas and from the least affluent socioeconomic backgrounds would be an important starting point."

ICT literacy is defined by MCEETYA as the ability of individuals to use ICT appropriately to access, manage, integrate and evaluate information, develop new understandings, and communicate with others in order to participate effectively in society.

The ICT Literacy Report is the third published as part of the National Assessment Program, and follows the 2003 national Year 6 Science Report and the Civics and Citizenship Years 6 and 10 Report 2004. The next national ICT assessment is due in 2008.

The National Assessment Program – ICT Literacy, Years 6 & 10 report, published by MCEETYA is available online from <http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/>

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An excellent teacher for every child

The Rudd government was elected with the promise of a 'revolution' to provide Australia with a world-class education system. Why is an education revolution required, and what forms could it take? In this recent opinion article, published in The Canberra Times, ACER chief executive Professor Geoff Masters looks at Australia's education priorities.

According to a recent OECD report, 13% of Australian 15-year-olds are at risk of not having the basic skills necessary for work and future citizenship. The situation is worse among Indigenous students (40%), in remote parts of Australia (27%) and for the lowest socioeconomic quartile (23%).

Although these percentages are not unusual by international standards, they highlight an important element in Australia's current skills shortage: too many young people are leaving our schools inadequately prepared for the workforce and adult life. The personal, societal and economic costs of this problem have been extensively documented and present governments with a challenge that may well require a revolution.

But which of the levers available to government are likely to be most effective in raising standards among our lowest achievers? The factors leading to low achievement are complex. Often they are related to broader social and health issues beyond the control of the education system.

Government initiatives in education have included improved testing and identification of children with low levels of literacy and numeracy, clearer reporting to parents, the provision of additional tutoring for at-risk students, and the better preparation of teachers to teach fundamental skills such as reading. At a general level, educational science suggests that the most effective lever for improving the performance of underachievers is to improve the quality of classroom teaching: to get all teachers doing what our best teachers already do.

While excellent teachers are not identical, they do have some characteristics in common. For example, they create classroom environments in which there is a belief that all students can learn successfully, where students are motivated by curiosity, value learning for its own sake, and feel supported and safe to take risks.

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Learning cultures of this kind are more effective in the long term than 'performance' cultures in which learning is driven by external demands, competition and the threat of failure.

Outstanding teachers also monitor the progress and learning needs of individual learners. They take time to understand children's interests and motivations and to diagnose individual difficulties and misunderstandings. This is a challenge in the average classroom in which some children can be five or six years ahead of other children of the same age. But excellent teachers understand that teaching is more than delivering a fixed curriculum to a class of students. They appreciate the importance of catching learning problems early and know that, unless educational needs are identified and addressed, some children will fall further behind over time.

Having identified students' learning needs, outstanding teachers use evidence-based strategies and interventions to target those needs. They draw on a body of professional knowledge about effective methods of teaching: what works, for whom and under what conditions. They are eager to learn from research and practice, to experiment and to share successes and failures with colleagues. They know that becoming a better teacher requires ongoing learning and that teaching expertise, like other forms of expertise, requires years of work. The emphasis for these teachers is on seeing every child make substantial progress. They recognise and celebrate such progress, even if a child is still performing below most children of the same age.

So what can governments do to get all teachers doing what our best already do? Part of the answer is to attract the best possible people to take up teaching as a career. This, in turn, will depend on making teaching more attractive. One way for governments to enhance the status of teaching is to work with the profession itself to clarify what it means to be an excellent teacher, to support the development of a national system for certifying teachers of excellence (perhaps similar to the CPA for accountants), and to pay more to teachers who meet these high standards. If the Business Council of Australia had its way, our best teachers would be paid substantially more – up to \$130 000 a year.

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In parallel, there needs to be an investment in the professional development of teachers and school leaders specifically focused on the attainment of advanced standards of practice. The focus should be on developing skills in diagnosing learning needs and implementing targeted, evidenced-based teaching methods.

To support teachers and school leaders in addressing the needs of all students, most schools would benefit from increased technical and paraprofessional support. A common complaint among teachers is that they spend too much time on external demands and non-teaching activities. Increased incentives also are required to ensure that our best teachers teach in schools where they are most needed – particularly in rural and remote schools and schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

Providing every Australian child with excellent teaching certainly will require an education revolution. But can we afford anything less?

[Professor Geoff Masters](#) is CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research.

This article was published in *The Canberra Times* ('Back to the classroom to improve education system,' by Geoff Masters, *The Canberra Times*, 11 January 2008, page 11) and [online](#).

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Teacher education courses in Victoria

Teachers need deep content knowledge and comprehensive understanding of student learning processes to be effective in the classroom, says the latest ACER paper on teacher education.

A study by [Lawrence Ingvarson](#), [Adrian Beavis](#) and [Elizabeth Kleinhenz](#) has been published in the *European Journal of Teacher Education*. The study investigated the characteristics of effective pre-service education programs, essentially asking the question: What changes should be made to teacher education courses to better prepare future teachers?

More than 1,000 teachers at the beginning of their second year of teaching responded to the survey, which asked them to rate how well their teacher education course had prepared them for the reality of the classroom. The survey, commissioned by the Victorian Institute of Teaching, found that on average teacher education programs produced graduates who felt moderately prepared to meet the Institute's professional standards describing what beginning teachers need to know and should be able to do. Significant variation in responses, however, indicated that while many teachers felt well prepared, a worrying proportion believed their preparation was less than adequate.

The teachers who felt best prepared for the classroom were those who had a strong grasp of the content they were teaching and how to teach it, of not just factual knowledge but also methods of teaching specific to the content, of gauging and building on students' existing understanding, and of developing and implementing units of work.

The implications of this finding are significant given the wide variation that exists across universities in the proportion of time spent on courses with a focus on areas of curriculum content (such as literacy or mathematics), and how to teach that content. In mathematics, for example, another ACER study found that the proportion of time varies from as low as 3 per cent in some universities to as much as 30 per cent in others. This raises questions about the criteria currently used to accredit teacher education programs and whether they need to include clearer expectations about the proportion of course time to be spent on ensuring deep understanding of the content and how to teach it effectively.

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Courses that focused on methods of planning and assessment produced graduates who felt able to design challenging curriculum units, manage classrooms, monitor student progress, teach cross curriculum and work effectively with parents. Less than 20 per cent of respondents, however, said that their courses had adequately prepared them to establish appropriate learning goals for their students, give useful and timely feedback to students and keep useful records of their students' progress.

Opportunity to receive feedback from lecturers and practising teachers also had a significant effect on teacher preparedness. Most respondents, however, reported receiving little feedback as they were learning to teach; one respondent noted being observed just once in a four-year degree with 100 days of teaching practicum.

The nature and extent of the practicum, however, was not strongly related to the preparedness of the teachers. This is not to say that the practicum is not important; it is more likely that the practicum experience was probably much the same for students across all courses. Teachers from most courses made frequent mention of unsatisfactory arrangements for practicum. Many had difficulty integrating theory and practice.

While the study found wide variation in the reported quality of teacher education programs, it has not found that teacher education is unnecessary; quite the opposite. In a field where some have questioned the impact of, or need for, professional preparation programs, this is a significant finding. The results of the study, though perhaps unsurprising, do say that teacher education matters.

The full report from the ACER study, *Teacher education courses in Victoria: Perceptions of their effectiveness and factors affecting their impact*, can be found at www.vit.vic.edu.au

An article about the study was published in the *European Journal of Teacher Education*, Volume 30, Issue, 4 November 2007.

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ACER UPDATE

ACER and VIF Program to provide exchange opportunities for Australian teachers

ACER has formed an alliance with the Visiting International Faculty Program (VIF), the United States' largest international-exchange program for teachers, to help provide Australian teachers with an opportunity to teach in the United States and share knowledge and teaching skills with American colleagues.

ACER will work closely with primary and secondary Australian educators interested in applying to teach in the U.S. with the VIF Program. ACER will handle applications from Australian teachers. Between 60 and 100 teachers Australian teachers will be selected for the exchange program and they will be posted in the US for short period of up to two years. Information on how to apply for the program will be posted on the ACER website in late February. [Read ACER's Media Release.](#)

Physical activity and bodyweight of 17-year-olds examined

A briefing paper from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), published by ACER, describes the physical activity and body weight reported by a sample of more than 7000 17 year-olds during 2005. It reports on their participation levels in sport and exercise, their health, body mass index (BMI) and associations between these and other characteristics.

Overall, while 85 per cent of young people reported playing regular sport or exercise, only 25 per cent reported playing sport or exercise on a daily basis. Seventy-two per cent of the survey's participants rated their general health as either excellent or very good. However, one fifth had a BMI placing them in the overweight to obese weight range, sparking concern.

Hoops, hurdles and high jumps: Physical activity and bodyweight among 17 year-olds was published as LSAY Briefing Number 13 and is available from [LSAY page](#) of this website.

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Teacher Magazine achieves Bell Awards success

Teacher Magazine was successful at the 2007 Publishers Australia Bell Awards taking out an award or being highly commended in three categories.

- Writer of the Year - Rebecca Leech, *Teacher Magazine* - Winner
- Business to Business Magazine of the Year - *Teacher Magazine* - Highly Commended
- Best Printing - Jillian Coates/Mary Giblin, *Teacher Magazine* - Highly Commended

Education the key to overcoming disadvantage

It's an article of faith that education is the key to overcoming disadvantage and opening the door of opportunity. However young people don't commence their education from the same starting line as Professor Stephen Dinham explains in this opinion article.

Some beginning primary students are already ahead of the pack. They come from families where English literacy is part of day-to-day life. They've been read to from an early age, received a variety of intellectual stimulation, attended preschool and have begun to acquire essential literacy skills. They have had their emotional and physical needs met. These students are ready for schooling and will receive on-going parental encouragement, support and direction. Providing they receive quality teaching in supportive and challenging schools, they will be well set to succeed.

Others enter primary education well behind their peers. Their parents may lack English literacy skills and many won't have had the benefits of preschool. Their development and achievement will be compromised by poverty, disadvantage and health issues. Parental support may be limited, particularly when parents themselves under-achieved at school.

Once schooling commences, it's not a level playing field. For some students, school is an uphill obstacle race while for others it is straightforward. Initial and continuing advantage and disadvantage can widen achievement over time.

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Struggling students are loaded up with handicaps and encounter new obstacles which hinder progress. Some experience a series of false starts as they move from school to school, each transition undermining achievement. By the end of primary schooling the achievement gap can be five years or more.

A key factor in student success is the quality of teaching each child receives, particularly in literacy, given that literacy underpins every aspect of schooling. School welfare programs and support for students are also important. Unfortunately, students from certain backgrounds and whole schools can be categorised and stigmatised, resulting in low expectations and a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement. When this inevitably occurs it reinforces prevailing attitudes and stereotypes – “You can’t expect much of children from ---”.

Once students commence high school, previous achievement powerfully predicts future accomplishment. Some students are well equipped academically and socially for secondary schooling. Others quickly lose momentum. Their inadequate skills, especially in literacy and numeracy, see them falter while their peers move ahead. Parental support and guidance often falls away. Lack of progress can result in disengagement and behavioural problems, further undermining achievement.

By the second and third years of secondary school, some students actually go backwards in academic capability, such as deskilling leaving them up to seven years behind some of their peers. They ‘hit the wall’ and have little chance of completing high school. Their life options, and those of their children are severely limited.

There are a number of imperatives from this situation that any ‘education revolution’ must address.

All young Australians need access to quality preschool education. This is especially so in poorer, rural and remote areas, where parents have a non-English speaking background and parents have poor literacy. Poor literacy is debilitating and the illiteracy cycle must be broken. Those least able to assist their children need help. Parents and community members need access to quality adult literacy programs.

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Health is crucial. Health problems compromise initial and on-going academic achievement. Diagnosis, intervention and support are required. State and federal health, education and welfare portfolios and programs need closer alignment.

Teaching, especially in literacy, is key. The quality of the classroom teacher is the largest in-school influence on student achievement. School leadership and teachers' professional learning are major influences on the quality of classroom teaching students receive. Both need attention, investment and development. High and realistic standards and expectations in schooling are also important. Settling for second best must not be an option.

A fully supported national curriculum is overdue. Effective student assessment and reporting are needed to target intervention and investment.

Parents should have choice in the school their children attend. However this choice should not be dictated by family circumstances or the relative impoverishment of one school or sector. We need a more level, equitable playing field in educational funding and provision.

Across Australia in the coming weeks another group of students commence their primary schooling. If education is going to be the means to personal fulfilment and opportunity, we need to ensure that all these young people and their families are given the support they need to succeed. If not, then the education process will reinforce disadvantage, not overcome it, to the detriment of us all.

[Professor Stephen Dinham](#)

Research Director, Teaching and Leadership, ACER.

Versions of this opinion article were published in:

The Advertiser ('Family support the key to education,' by Stephen Dinham, *The Advertiser*, 18 January 2008, page 20)

The Courier-Mail ('Every child deserves the best,' by Stephen Dinham, *The Courier-Mail*, 24 January 2008, page 38).

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